
Blade 20: Guardians of the Coral Throne

By Jeffrey Lord

Chapter 1

The light plane came out of its turn on to a straight and level course.

"Drop point coming up, gentlemen," said the RAF sergeant at the door.

Richard Blade ran his hands expertly over his parachute harness and gear, completing the final check by touch alone. Then he stepped forward to the door, getting a clearer view of the gray and green hills of Yorkshire crawling past a few thousand feet below. Behind him he heard the other two jumpers getting to their feet.

All three were experienced parachutists, here on the Parachute Brigade's jump range for a five-jump refresher course. One was a Royal Marine Commando, a major or senior captain, Blade suspected. One civilian, with an old face and a young body, probably Secret Service. And Richard Blade. He had been a crack agent for the ultrasecret intelligence agency M16 for some years. Now he was-

The drop light above the door flashed on. The sergeant gave Blade a thumbs-up signal. Blade stepped forward, bracing himself for a moment in the doorway while the air rushed around him at a hundred miles an hour. Then he spread out his arms and sprawled forward into thin air, in the apparently ungainly posture of the experienced skyjumper.

The roar of the plane's engine died away. Now Blade heard only the whisper of the air around him as his speed built up. He stayed spread-eagled and kept his eyes on the green hills below. They were coming up at him fast.

Blade's hand closed on his D-ring. At one thousand feet he pulled hard on the ripcord. He heard a rushing sound as his parachute streamed out. Then he felt the familiar bone-jarring jerk as it deployed above him and his free fall came to an end.

The ground was still coming up to meet him faster than he liked to see it. But the light ground wind was just enough to send him over the crest of one hill and on down the far slope. His feet struck short thick grass, still slick with dew, and went out from under him. He went down onto the seat of his pants, twisting and rolling as he did to spill air from the parachute. He rolled a good way down the slope, picking up bruises even through his padded jumpsuit, before the big nylon canopy flopped down on some bushes.

Blade rose to his feet, gathered in the parachute, and scrambled up to the top of the hill to look for the other two jumpers. He could see both of them, both obviously down safely. The Royal Marine had landed on the edge of a small grove of trees. The Secret Service man was climbing out of a pond, his khaki jumpsuit now dark and sodden with water.

The light plane was coming back now, flying low over the three jumpers, wagging its wings in answer to their waves. Close behind it was the helicopter that would pick them up and take them back to the airstrip for their next flight and jump. It reached Blade first and circled around him twice, the rotorwash kicking up a spray of pebbles, twigs, and dead leaves. Then it drifted down to hang in the air over him.

Blade threw in his parachute, gripped the handholds on either side of the door, and swung himself into the cabin.

The crew chief leaned over and shouted in Blade's ear as he stood up inside the vibrating, rattling cabin. "Message just arrived at base for you, Mister Blade. You're to report to your London office at ten A.M. tomorrow. File Acorn."

"Thanks."

Blade sat down on the metal bench at the rear of the cabin and began unlacing his jump boots. In his mind the message was echoing so loudly that for the time being it drowned out the noise of the helicopter.

Ten o'clock tomorrow morning, in London, and File Acorn. That meant starting back tonight, as soon as the day's program of five jumps was over. Too bad. He'd planned to stay overnight at a little country inn about, six miles down the road from the jump range. He'd stopped there on the way up and had good memories of the food. He'd also noticed a particularly elegant young brunette staying there, apparently unattached. He'd had notions of finding out if she was still there, actually unattached, and possibly receptive and congenial. One more opportunity stamped out by his duties!

They were very special duties. The Royal Marine might serve England by leading fighting men ashore on hostile coasts. The Secret Service man might serve England by ferreting out her enemies' secrets or quietly eliminating her enemies' spies.

Richard Blade served England by traveling into unknown Dimensions.

Four men alone knew the whole secret of what he did. There was Blade. As far as anyone knew, he was the only human being who had ever traveled into Dimension X and come back alive and sane.

Blade didn't get puffed up over this. In fact, both he and the others who knew what Project Dimension X was all about and how dangerous it was would have cheerfully used a dozen different people if they had that many. They looked for them, too. They had looked long and hard. They were still looking. But so far all they had was Blade. He was a natural adventurer, who personally didn't mind at all living dangerously. But for England's sake it would be far better to have a dozen people than just one. One man's luck would sooner or later run out, and his death would bring Project Dimension X to a screeching halt.

Worrying about that was the job of the other three men. There was Lord Leighton. The computer that hurled Blade into the unknown was his creation. His hunchbacked, polio-twisted body held one of the finest scientific minds and one of the worst tempers in England.

There was J. He had been and still was the head of MI6. He had seen Blade's perfect blend of physical and mental qualities while the younger man was still at Oxford. Over the years he had seen Blade go off on one dangerous mission after another, first all over the world and then all over other worlds as well. It was never easy for him, and never would be. As a professional spymaster, J was a lonely man, and Blade filled the place of the son he had never had.

Finally, there was the Prime Minister. He sat very much in the background, accepting the miracle that was Project Dimension X, protecting it, financing it, helping it in a thousand and one absolutely essential ways without making any pretense of really understanding it. The Prime Minister was a politician, but he was also an honest man, and he was just as devoted to England as Blade, Lord Leighton, or J.

So they made a good team. They were an unlikely quartet of miracle workers. But they were also a successful one, in a deadly business where success was all that mattered.

"File Acorn" was this month's code word for another trip into Dimension X. Tomorrow at ten o'clock in the morning Blade would be far below the Tower of London, wired into Lord Leighton's mammoth computer, ready to be fired off into the unknown.

Blade's mind was so occupied with what would be happening next morning that he hardly noticed the helicopter's landing. He only came fully alert again when the sergeant tapped him on the shoulder.

"Mister Blade, sir-time for the next go-round."

"Thanks, sergeant."

Blade stood up and started shoving his equipment into its carrying bag. As the helicopter's rotors whined and whispered down into silence he jumped down onto the grass of the landing pad. At the far end of the runway the little high-winged jump plane was banking in for a landing. Sunlight sparked and glinted off its wings. The sun was fully up now, and the last traces of mist and dew were rapidly vanishing. It was going to be a beautiful day for jumping.

It was also going to be a day for keeping his mind on the job at hand, and not on what was going to happen tomorrow. It would be bloody silly for him to rack himself up doing something he had done sixty or seventy times!

Chapter 2

As always, the underground corridor seemed to stretch out for an empty, echoing, gleaming mile ahead. Blade quickened his stride, wanting to cover the distance as fast as possible. As always, he found himself getting more and more keyed-up as the place and time of his trip into Dimension X approached.

Beside him strode J, keeping pace with Blade in spite of his sixty-odd years. J had not always been a deskbound spymaster. He had put in his years in the field, and done his field work with deadly efficiency. Even today he never seemed entirely comfortable with sitting and watching younger men set out under his orders to risk and sometimes lose their lives.

"You're sure you're feeling altogether fit?" he asked Blade.

"Perfectly, sir. Not an ache, not a twinge. I spent an hour in the sauna last night, and I honestly couldn't be feeling better."

"That's good. Not that it would be easy to persuade Leighton to hold things off, unless you showed up in a wheelchair."

"Oh, I doubt if the old boffin's that tough," said Blade with a grin. "I imagine a pair of crutches would be enough to convince him."

"Quite possibly. But he'd probably ask for a doctor's certificate in that case."

"Three certificates, you mean, sir. And from different doctors."

"No doubt."

The two men's caustic wit at Lord Leighton's expense was only partly sincere. Much of the time the scientist lived up to his reputation of having a computer where other people had a heart. At other times it was obvious that he really cared about Blade as more than a prize guinea pig for his grandest experiment.

"It's very good to hear you're feeling fit," J repeated. "I would feel rather bad of you had taken a tumble carrying out one of my ideas."

"No need to worry on that score, sir," replied Blade. "It's only good sense to give me a refresher course in modern commando and field-survival techniques. After all, there's no guarantee I won't land in a technologically advanced Dimension again. I've done it several times already. If I do it again, I may find myself part of a modern army rather than leading a sword-swinging horde. I might as well be able to make myself valuable anywhere."

"True enough," said J. "But I have the feeling you find being the leader of the sword-swingers more, eh, fun?"

Blade nodded. "I couldn't agree with you more, sir." It was sometimes uncanny how well the old man understood him. But then part of J's skill at his work was sizing up people, and he had been watching Blade for a fair number of years.

Now they were at the door to the main computer rooms. The last of the electronic sentinels scanning the corridors of the complex and guarding its secrets gave them its invisible looking-over. A computer registered their characteristics and matched them with data on people authorized to enter the complex. It was a fairly sophisticated computer by most standards. But it was a helpless idiot compared to the monster that filled the innermost chamber, Lord Leighton's private sanctuary.

The scientist himself was waiting to meet them as they entered the sanctuary. All around him the chamber was gray-gray rock above, gray tile on the floor, the gray crackled finish of the towering consoles of the huge computer. With his white hair, pale skin, and hunched body inside its dirty white lab coat, Leighton looked like some weird creature accustomed to lurk in deep, lightless caves. But his eyes were bright and his smile was surprisingly warm and open.

"Welcome, gentlemen, welcome. No rush this time-it's going to be slow and careful. If I thought we could repeat the results of the last trip by rushing, I'd be more than happy to do so. But our best psychiatrists think whatever caused Richard to return to Tharn was in his own mind. They'd rather like some more time to try digging it out of him, sooner or later."

J raised an eyebrow. "I suppose you didn't think of postponing this trip while they did it?"

Lord Leighton looked as shocked as if he had just been accused of sacrificing virgins by the light of a full moon. "And hold up the entire Project for someone's wild-goose chase? I hardly think that would be reasonable."

J looked at Blade and Blade looked back at him. They were both thinking the same thing. Lord Leighton was a fine one to talk, considering how often he had held up the Project, added thousands of pounds to its budget, or actually endangered Blade's life and limb on his own wildgoose chases! But there was no point in mentioning this now. Blade headed for the dressing booth carved into the rock wall, while J went over and unfolded the spectator seat that Lord Leighton had installed for his benefit.

Inside the booth Blade went through the usual routine of stripping and smearing himself with smelly

grease as protection against electrical burns from the computer. He had done this so often by now that he could do it almost by reflex while his mind considered other matters.

Just now it was considering his last trip. After an incredible amount of effort and money wasted trying to get a Controlled Return, Blade managed one quite by accident. He returned to a Dimension he had previously visited. This was an enormously satisfying experience for him. The Dimension was Tharn. Tharn, where his son ruled. Tharn, where he fought the murderous assaults of the Looters and destroyed them. Tharn, where he was Mazda, the living god who had saved the People twice. It had been the most surprising and the most satisfactory experience of his whole career in Project Dimension X, and that was saying a good deal!

Could he do anything on his own to try for another Controlled Return? Was there something he could have in his mind at the moment the computer gripped it, to produce one? Possibly. But even if he could, would it be worth the risk? He decided not. Dimension X was still largely unknown. He had visited perhaps twenty out of literally an infinite number of possible Dimensions. How he got to any of them was still largely a mystery. Any human brain, his own included, was still almost as much a mystery as Dimension X. So he would follow Lord Leighton's guidance, and play things straight and simple this time. If he added his own element of unpredictability to all the normal problems, who knew where he might end up?

Blade picked up the loincloth hung ready for him on a peg and knotted it about himself. That was one hopelessly predictable element about his trips into Dimension X. The loincloth and anything else he might put on would be a total waste of time. He would arrive naked as a newborn baby, as always.

He opened the door of the booth and stepped out into the chamber. J was already seated. Lord Leighton stood by the main control panel, watching the dance of the lights on it. The "countdown" had started.

He walked over to the chair that squatted in a glass booth, overshadowed by the looming masses of the computer's consoles. He sat down and started breathing slowly and deeply. The rubber seat and back of the chair were cold against his bare skin.

Lord Leighton went swiftly to work. Hundreds of wires in a dozen different colors led out of the computer, each wire ending in an electrode shaped like a metal cobra's head. Now Leighton taped the electrodes one by one to every part of Blade's body from scalp to toes. Ears, neck, arms, legs, chest, shoulders-even his penis-seemed to be sprouting dozens of tiny snakes.

Finally the job was done. Through the jungle of wires Blade saw Lord Leighton step over to the controls again and make a final visual check. The scientist didn't trust anybody or anything to function without his personal supervision, not even his prize computer. Blade didn't mind that cautiousness at all. He knew from much experience how thoroughly even the most sophisticated machine could tie itself in knots without human care.

Everything seemed to check out. Leighton looked at Blade, an inquiring frown on his ugly face. Blade deliberately looked at J first, grinned in farewell, then looked back at the scientist and nodded. Leighton's hand rose, then came down on the red master switch and swept it down to the bottom of its slot.

It seemed at first that the lighting in the chamber was flickering on and off. Then Blade realized that it was not just the lighting. Everything around him-Lord Leighton and J, the computer, even the rock walls-was flickering in and out of existence. As the world flickered, a highpitched drone began to fill Blade's ears, like the buzzing of a swarm of gigantic bees flying around and around the chamber.

Gradually the droning grew louder, until his ears began to ache from it. His surroundings flickered on and off faster and faster and began to change color. Lord Leighton turned gold, J turned bright glowing red, the computer consoles turned silver with all the blinking lights on their faces turning blue, the rock walls above and beyond turned dark green.

The droning grew still louder, until it seemed like a solid object being driven into Blade's ears to rupture his eardrums and pierce his brain. The world around him began to soften around the edges, then flow and slump downward like a stick of butter melting in a hot pan. As it flowed, it gave off gurgling and rumbling noises that rose even above the droning. The noise around him was now so terrible that Blade wanted to scream. His mouth was open, but he knew that he would never be able to tell if any sound was coming out.

The world around him finished dissolving. All the colors broke up and flowed madly into one another and around one another and over one another. It was like being in the middle of a gigantic whirlpool trying to whirl in three or four directions at once. Blade saw streams of incandescent color flowing through him, but felt nothing.

Still the droning went on. The world was all madly racing colors and terrible noise, more and more furious each moment.

Then it was nothing at all but a blackness and a freezing, silent cold that Blade felt in the split-second before he stopped feeling anything at all.

Chapter 3

Blade popped into the new Dimension with his mind still filled with memories of the bone-chilling cold in the blackness between Dimensions. He found himself shivering violently as he drifted up to full consciousness.

He was lying on his stomach, on a hard, cold, rough surface. He could not see more than two feet in front of his nose. In those two feet he saw rough gray bare rock, with a few pebbles here and there and a small clump of sickly grass.

He shivered again, and realized that there was still a chilly wind blowing over his bare skin. As it always did at this point, his head ached. But it ached much less than usual. Blade raised himself on his hands and knees, scraping his skin on the rough stone. When the movement didn't make his head throb or spin, he gathered his legs under him and shakily rose to his feet.

He was at the bottom of a small draw in rugged, broken country. All around him rose gray rocky hills, seamed and scarred by millions of years of harsh weather, supporting a few stunted trees and a few patches of grass. The air was chill but dry and crystal clear, and in the brilliant sunlight that poured down from a flawless blue sky every detail of the landscape stood out dramatically.

One of those details was a column of brown smoke that rose into the sky from beyond the next hill. If Blade had landed one valley farther over, he would have landed practically on top of whoever or whatever was making the smoke.

Blade tested his muscles one by one, then did a few quick exercises to loosen up his whole superbly trained and conditioned body.

He was not surprised to find that everything still worked as well as ever. He would have been surprised to find that anything didn't. He knew as a matter of sober fact that he had not only an athlete's body, but a warrior's. He also had a warrior's skills in armed and unarmed combat, with weapons and techniques from Stone Age to modern. Without these skills, he would never have survived any of his journeys into Dimension X. If he ever started losing them, he would not survive many more journeys.

Knowing he was as ready as possible for anything he might have to face, Blade headed for the smoke. He chose to climb the hill. That way he might be able to spy out the smokemakers from a high, invisible perch before going down to greet them-or turning and putting as many miles as possible between himself and them.

Blade soon found himself almost regretting the decision to climb. The slope of raw gray rock was steeper than it looked, and much rougher. Over long stretches he could not even walk upright, but had to haul himself upward from handhold to handhold.

In one place the only way up was a crack in an almost vertical slab of crumbling rock. Blade inched his way up the crack, feet braced against one side and back against the other. He mentally blessed his experience climbing in the Alps, hoped the crumbling rock would not crumble at the wrong time and place, and winced as jagged points and sharp edges scraped and gouged his bare skin.

Nothing happened until he was just clear of the crack. Then with a rumble and a crashing roar several tons of rock peeled away from one side of the crack, plunged downward, and spilled out on the slope below. Boulders and slabs larger than Blade went sliding and rolling away down the hill, with more rumbles and crashes that echoed around the empty valley like an artillery barrage. Blade winced, less now at the pain of his scrapes and gouges than at the noise of the rockfall. Anybody within five miles could hear it, unless they were stone deaf. Anybody who took the rockfall as the sign of an approaching enemy would be alert and waiting. But Blade was no more inclined to turn back than he had ever been. One of these days, he suspected, this habit of pushing on would turn out to be his last mistake. In the meantime it helped him get into things a lot faster and find out a lot more. As secret agent or explorer, finding out what was going on had always been the heart of his job.

He continued his climb and reached the ridge in a few minutes. Near the top he dropped on hands and knees and crawled the rest of the way: Peering down between two boulders, he scanned the slope and valley below.

Two hundred feet below him, a dozen men sat around a small fire. Two gaunt and swaybacked horses were tethered to stakes driven into the ground just beyond the fire. Beyond the horses a naked, filthy, human figure crouched, also tied by the ankle to a stake. It was so gaunt and dirt-blackened that Blade could not tell whether it was a man or a woman.

He turned his attention back to the dozen men around the fire. They were not much cleaner than their prisoner, and their hair was just as long. All wore beards and all wore fur tunics and baggy leather boots and breeches. All wore long knives, and several had short swords in battered sheaths hanging from bleached leather belts. They were alternately spooning something out of a large communal brass pot and gnawing meat off the bones of several small animals.

Apart from the knives and swords, none of the men were wearing any weapons. But each seemed to have a good set piled ready to hand behind him. Blade couldn't tell exactly what was in each pile. But it looked as if these people were well able to take care of themselves, and if not exactly looking for trouble, well able to handle it if it came to them.

Blade made sure that the damage he had taken climbing up the hill hadn't slowed him down. Then he scrambled to his feet, stepped out into full view of the men below, and held out both arms, hands spread out in the standard gesture of peace.

It took a moment for the barbarians to notice the new addition to the skyline. When they did, they reacted as fast as Blade had expected, and more skillfully. They all snatched up weapons and shields and clapped helmets on their shaggy heads. Two ran to the horses and untethered them. One ran to the slave and tied his hands. Three snatched up bows and ran for the nearest cover, a patch of boulders around two stunted trees farther down the valley. They vanished behind the boulders. A man wearing greaves and a rusty breastplate stood by the campfire, shouting orders at the others.

Blade waited until he was sure everybody was looking at him and reasonably sure that none of the archers were simply going to shoot him down. Then he started down the hill, lowering his arms but keeping his hands spread out well in front of him.

As he came down the slope he had to watch carefully for places where he could be sure of his footing. If he had to scramble down on all fours, he would be a helpless target for the archers. If he tried too steep a piece on foot and tumbled down the hill, he would certainly destroy his dignity and possibly also break a few bones. The rocks on the way down looked just as hard as the ones he had met on the way up.

Eventually the last steep piece was above him and he strode forward down on to the valley floor. As he did so he was relieved to see the archers rise from cover and sling their bows at an order from the leader. Apparently the leader no longer thought Blade might have to be shot down on a second's notice. More important, he could give orders and get obedience from his men.

Blade approached the men with long swinging strides. By now they could see he was naked and unarmed. When he was twenty feet from the campfire the leader stepped forward, drew his sword, and held it out across his body.

"Stop there, man. Who are you?"

Blade decided to start with at least part of the truth and play it by ear from there.

"My name is Blade. Who are you?"

"You do not have to know that, man. But we must know what you are doing in the land of the Scadori."

"I have traveled here from a far land."

"Have you had an accident here in our mountains? They do not like stupid strangers, that is true."

Blade had to guess at the proper answer to that question. "No, I have had no accident."

The man snorted. "I think then you lie. A naked man cannot travel far in these mountains of ours. He would die quickly when the Watcher of the Day turns away from the land. I think perhaps you are of the Karani. Or will you try to tell me that you fell from the sky?"

Blade was half-tempted to agree with the second idea and try to persuade this leader that he was a messenger from whatever gods the Scadori worshipped. But he didn't know whether the Scadori listened reverently to such messengers or sacrificed them on the spot. He was quite sure he should not admit to being one of the Karani. The leader's tone of voice had made it quite clear, that they were mortal enemies

of the Scadori.

"I am not of the Karani."

The leader's eyes widened. His mouth also widened, exposing a large number of filthy teeth. He threw his head back until Blade thought the man's helmet would slip off, and roared with laughter. When he stopped laughing his eyes returned to Blade.

"You say I lie, then?" The harsh challenge in the voice was unmistakable. So was the smug triumph.

Blade swore mentally. Apparently he had said the wrong thing. Now this hairy clown was going to claim that he had been offended and entertain his followers by either butchering Blade or humiliating him hopelessly. Damn!

But there was no way back that wasn't a good deal more dangerous than going on. Barbarians like these people respected bravado, flaunted courage, and the skills of a warrior. Blade decided he would do his best to please them, and throw in a few surprises for good measure.

Blade threw back his own head and crossed his arms on his massive chest as he in turn roared with laughter. The leader's eyes widened again, this time in surprise. He obviously hadn't expected this.

"Yes, I say that you lie," said Blade. "Not only do you lie, but a great deal of stinking breath comes out of that great flapping mouth of yours when you do. I do not like smelling your stink." If he was going to have to fight this man, he might as well make him blind with rage first.

The other man's mouth opened again and stayed open. Then he closed it with a snap and said in a growling voice, "I had thought to kill you quickly. But now by the Watchers you will see your manhood burn in our fire before your eyes close."

Blade grinned. "First see if you can kill me at all before you waste any more of the breath you may need for saying your prayers."

The leader sputtered like a boiling pot for a moment, too furious to speak at all. Then he turned his back on Blade with a snarl, and motioned to one of his followers. Blade raised a hand.

"Hold! There is no need to give me any sort of weapon. I will face you as I am and kill you with only these." He turned in a complete circle to remind everybody that he was naked and unarmed. He held out his massive hands in front of him as he did so.

That line stopped things dead. The leader spun around and stared at Blade as if he had just turned into a monster.

"You are mad."

Blade shook his head. "I am not mad. Warriors in my homeland can fight with their bare hands, as well as their swords-or their mouths. What is your problem, my friend? Are you afraid to face a man who fights only with his hands just because you are too stupid to understand how this may be done?"

The leader let out another squall of rage. Blade saw barely concealed smiles on the faces of several of the other warriors. That made it almost certain that the leader would decide to fight on Blade's terms. Otherwise he would lose too much reputation in the eyes of his followers.

"Come, my friend. Say your prayers to the Watchers and anything else you want to pray to, and let us fight. I grow impatient. And what is your name, by the way? I would know the name of the man I am about to kill, so that my women may weave it into my war-song and my sons and bards sing it over my grave barrow when my time comes."

The leader hesitated. Blade clapped his hands together angrily, as though summoning a slow waiter at a restaurant. "Come! You may fear that I will use your true name against you. But that is a foolish fear. What can I do to you after I have killed you?"

The leader grunted a reluctant assent. "You will not be singing anything about anybody after this fight because you will have no tongue to sing with. I will cut it out with a dull knife after you can no longer stop me." His voice no longer had its self-confident ring. He sounded like a man trying to conceal from both his followers and himself that he was afraid. He was not afraid of Blade as a warrior, but as something unknown.

"My name is Uργο."

"Very good, Uργο. Now-what keeps an armed man from striking down one who stands before him naked as a babe and armed only with his two hands?"

"Have you said your prayers, Blade?" asked Uργο.

"The warriors of my people say all our prayers before departing from our land on long and dangerous journeys among strangers. That way they do not have to wait when there is a fight at hand, and no one wonders if they are afraid to fight." He stared hard at Uργο.

"Yes, Uργο," said one of the archers, who had now joined the circle around the campfire. "Why not fight this man now? He is willing, and it is time."

"Fight, Uργο, fight!" shouted several more, drawing their swords and waving them. "Fight him now, Uργο! He will fight you."

Uργο turned and glared at his followers. The blazing fury in his glare should have burnt them all to cinders on the spot. Blade knew that he had divided Uργο from his followers. They were beginning to doubt his courage and even question it to his face. Uργο would fight his battle alone.

Then Uργο nodded. "I fight." He picked up a rectangular shield and a straight short sword like a Roman soldier's. If Uργο knew how to use the short sword for thrusting, he could always keep it out in front of himself and always ready to strike. Meanwhile the shield would cover most of his body that was not behind the point of the sword.

Uργο moved out toward Blade, and Blade dropped into a fighting stance and waited. Seen close up, Uργο looked enormous-as tall as Blade, broader, and layered with muscle under the filthy and battle-scarred skin. If this man had half a brain in his shaggy head, he would be a formidable opponent.

Uργο's first attack was a straight-in rush, sword stabbing out in front of him. Blade was able to side-step it, but not easily. Before he had turned completely around, Uργο was coming in again. The man was fast on his feet, and too large and strong for the armor to slow him down at all. Blade swung aside from this rush, too, but heard disapproving murmurs from the other warriors. Obviously he would have to stand up to Uργο and fight him at close range. Otherwise he would lose much of the reputation he had gained

among these warriors with his bold challenge and Uργο's reluctance to fight.

So the next time Uργο came in, Blade stood his ground. One hand clamped down on Uργο's sword-arm while the other tried to hook around the shield for a chop at the shield arm. Simultaneously Blade drove his knee up at Uργο's groin.

But there was too much of the shield and Uργο knew how to use it. He smashed it downward into Blade's knee, sending an agonizing shock up and down Blade's leg. Before Blade could recover, Uργο swung the shield sideways against the arm reaching around it. Blade thought his arm was going to break off at the elbow. Then Uργο jerked his sword-arm out of Blade's grip, nearly slashing Blade's other arm in the process. Blade took one tremendous leap backward to open the distance. The two fighters faced each other, more warily than before.

Uργο was fast, he was smart, and he was much too strong for Blade to overpower him by sheer muscle. This was not going to be easy, Blade realized. It might even be fatal for him, rather than Uργο.

Several more close grapples confirmed Blade's judgment of his opponent. He picked up nothing worse than scrapes and aches and bruises, not even enough to slow him down. But he did no harm at all to Uργο. The barbarian warrior was now dripping with sweat and stank even worse than before. But he was barely breathing hard, and his shield and sword moved as fast as ever.

Obviously that shield-sword combination gave Uργο a nearly solid defense. Blade would have to get around it or break it down. He wasn't fast enough to do the first. He knew that by now. But what about the second?

Blade closed in, then pivoted on one foot and whipped the other foot around in a full-power wheel kick. A size-twelve foot with all of Blade's solid two hundred and ten pounds behind it smashed into the center of Uργο's shield. There was a crash as if it had been hit by a heavy rock; and Uργο staggered back several feet before he could fully recover his balance. Before he could advance again, Blade backed away until he was just out of range, then came in again.

Crash! Another direct hit on the center of the shield. This time Uργο was braced for the blow, but it still jarred him from head to foot. Again; he could not strike back in time.

The third time Blade came in, he aimed his kick low. Uργο flinched as he saw Blade's foot coming like a guided missile straight for his groin. The shield snapped downward. Blade's timing was perfect. His foot crashed into the lower edge of the shield, driving the metal-sheathed edge back hard against Uργο's bare thigh and twisting the shield straps around the man's arm. Uργο winced, then stared wide-eyed as Blade once more backed away.

The fourth time Blade came in, Uργο did just exactly what he was supposed to do. Uργο crouched down behind his shield, resting the lower edge on the ground. He thought he'd be completely protected that way. He held his sword ready to thrust up at Blade, but it was a position where he could not easily move out to attack. Blade had won himself the chance to get close in and live, if he moved fast enough.

He was even more of a blur than before as he moved in, foot shooting forward. It crashed into the upper edge of the shield and drove it back with a thud against Uργο's forehead. It struck below the rim of the helmet, and for a moment Uργο was half-dazed.

That moment was all Blade needed. He swung down out of the wheel kick and came in low, striking under the shield as Uργο raised it by reflex. Again he clamped down with his left hand on Uργο's sword

arm, this time precisely squeezing the wrist nerves. With his right hand he grasped the bottom edge of the shield and heaved upward. Urgo's half-numb arm rose with the shield and he tottered back, nearly losing his balance.

Blade struck again. He hooked his right foot around Urgo's left leg, pulling the man forward below and pushing him backward above. Urgo lost his balance completely and went over backward with a crash. His head smashed into the rocky ground so hard that not even his helmet saved him. Half-stunned, he stared blankly upward at Blade as the Englishman stamped down with one foot on his sword-arm. Bone cracked, the hand opened limply, and the sword clattered to the ground. Then Blade's foot came in one final time, smashing full-force into Urgo's chin. The blow sent the man sliding several feet along the ground. Larynx shattered, spine snapped, he was dead before he stopped sliding.

Blade stood up and stared around the circle of warriors. They stared back. Several looked too stunned to show any emotion at all. One or two were frowning. But at least half had open smiles or grins on their bearded faces.

Blade decided it was time for a small speech. He pointed down at the body. "Urgo is dead. His name will go into my war-song as a mighty and worthy opponent, for as you all saw he fought strongly and well. Let no one say anything against his courage in my hearing, or I shall send him to join Urgo. Had he been taught the fighting ways of my people, I could not have beaten him, for he would have learned them well. Let him be remembered with honor."

This diplomacy straightened out the frowns and woke the stunned out of their trances. One of the warriors who had been smiling stepped forward, both hands held out with fingers spread.

"Blade, I think you are too kind to Urgo. He was indeed a strong fighter, but he thought he was even stronger than he was. With such warriors, long life is often just good fortune. His good fortune ran out when he met you."

He knelt and began unfastening Urgo's armor. "Blade, I am Chudo. I now lead this band of the Scadori. But it is my right to give the leadership and the leader's sword to you if you consent, for you have slain Urgo. Do you wish it?"

"You do not think that I might perhaps be of the Karani?"

"If you are of the Karani, Blade, then I, Chudo, am a little hopping mouse hiding among the rocks. Do I look like one?" Blade shook his head. "Then you are not of the Karani. But you may lead among the Scadori, if you wish."

"I do so wish." Blade took Urgo's sword and waved it three times around his head. The other warriors began to shout and cheer raucously.

Chapter 4

Blade discovered within a few hours that even a position of leadership among the Scadori was no bed of roses. Or if there were roses, they had very long thorns.

There was the ceremonial cup of beer that Chudo offered Blade. At least it tasted more like beer than anything else, although Blade was happy that he didn't know what really went into making it. He wouldn't have used the stuff to scrub any self-respecting floor. But he not only drank it, he was able to keep it down.

There was putting on the late and unlamented Urgo's armor and clothing. It was fortunate that Urgo had been an exceptionally large and beefy man. Blade was six feet one, weighed two hundred and ten pounds, and in a good many Dimensions had trouble finding clothing that didn't burst at the seams when he tried to put it on. But the armor was rusty and badly cared for, and as for the clothes, it had obviously been a long time since they were washed. They held enough dirt to stand up by themselves and almost enough assorted crawling things to walk away by themselves. They also stank beyond belief. In fact, the stink of the clothing surrounded Blade so thoroughly that he stopped noticing the smell of his new comrades. None of them seemed to have washed for a long time, either.

The porridge and the bits of roast meat they offered him for his meal weren't so bad. At least he could honestly say that he had eaten worse, although not much and not very often.

Blade decided he was going to find out as soon as possible who and what were the Karani-and where. Obviously they were one of the other peoples in this Dimension, but what else? If they were another tribe of barbarians like the Scadori, this was going to be a dull and dreary trip to Dimension X and a total waste of time as far as finding out anything or bringing anything back. But if the Karani were civilized, he was going to head for their territory as soon as he had a chance and move as fast as he could cover ground. If the Karani were close enough to fight with the Scadori, they were close enough for him to reach them sooner or later.

By the time he went to bed, Blade was even more determined to leave the Scadori if he got half a chance. Chudo offered him the crowning honor of the day-a chance to have the band's woman with him all night. Seen close-up, the slave was unmistakably female, although filthy, stringy-haired, and showing the signs of years of hunger and a good many beatings. Her dirt-encrusted back and buttocks were practically criss-crossed with scars, some only just healed.

"Who was she?" Blade asked. He tried to keep his voice casual, to match the contempt Chudo showed for the woman.

"Oh, nothing special. Just a Karani woman we took on a raid among their farms. To have a Karani woman for a band is rare now. The last Emperor kept a good watch on his people, may the Watchers shrivel him! But the new one is only a boy, they say. Perhaps we shall see things change for the better."

Blade shook his head. "I cannot take a woman now. It is my people's way that after we have killed we must lie apart from women for a full day and night. I would be cursed if I took the woman now."

Chudo nodded. "Your ways are strange, but if they produce such warriors as you are, they cannot be bad ways. But you will be apart from women for some time, I think. We have-" he broke off to count on his fingers "-seven days of walking before we come to our homes."

"I am a warrior," replied Blade. "I am used to going without many things for long times, even women."

One of the other warriors laughed harshly at that. "Has a eunuch come among us, perhaps?" Blade turned to glare at the man, raising both fists, and Chudo drew his sword. The man swallowed and turned away.

"So be it," said Chudo. "Then I shall take the woman first tonight, as is my right as leader next to you."

"Go ahead," said Blade.

Chudo did go ahead, vigorously. Blade heard his grunts and groans and the woman's whimpers and occasional screams of pain for quite a while. Eventually Chudo wore himself out and Blade was able to go to sleep. As he fell asleep he knew that he had learned a few useful things. The Karani were at least civilized enough to have a ruler who called himself an Emperor. But they were also such deadly enemies of the Scadori that if a Karani woman fell into Scadori hands she was treated worse than an animal. That meant a hatred between the two peoples that went very deep. That in turn meant that Blade would have to be very careful in asking about the Karani, and even more careful when the time came to escape to them.

Over the next few days Blade easily learned much of what he needed to know about the peoples of this Dimension. He simply kept his mouth shut and his ears open as the band of Scadori warriors tramped steadily across the rugged southern uplands of their home territory. Whatever one might say about their manners and habits, the warriors of Scador could certainly cover ground. They marched thirty miles a day and more. Fortunately Blade had held his own with the warriors of Zunga, who could cross fifty miles of their native plains in a single day.

The Scadori were a loose alliance of more or less independent tribes and clans scattered over an area at least as large as England. It was poor, barren, rugged land for the most part, like the land they were marching over or only a little better. Sometimes there was enough food and kind weather, often there were famine and storms. Since there had been people in Scador, those people had looked enviously at the lowlands to the southwest.

But in those lowlands lived the Karani. Not necessarily the High Karani, who lived in the golden city of Karanopolis beside the Great Water, so far away that a man could walk for a month before its shining towers came in sight. But people of the same blood, undeniably. If the Scadori raided down into the lowlands, the High Karani sooner or later marched out against them.

Then there was war, and a terrible one, for neither side showed any mercy at all. Almost invariably the Karani won, sooner or later. They had not only a sturdy infantry, but horsemen who could fight equally well on horseback or on foot, with bow, sword, or lance. The Scadori called the Emperor's elite fighting men the Riders of Death.

The Karani were civilized and formidable as well. But they were not invincible. They could make mistakes, they could be overwhelmed by sheer weight of numbers. As the raids and wars went on over the centuries, the Scadori gained skill in fast marching, laying ambushes, deadly close-in fighting. They captured Karani weapons and copied them, passing them on with the new war skills from father to son. Some day the Scadori would be able to march out as a people, many thousands of them. They would march against the Karani, and then even the Riders of Death would give way before them.

"In the meantime," said Chudo, "the wars and raids must go on, whether we lose or win. If we do not go out and fight, our warriors will lose their courage and our sons will have no examples to follow."

As Chudo promised, they marched for six days. From the position of the sun Blade could tell that they were heading roughly northwest. The land also slowly but surely rose under them. Each night the stars shone more clearly from the sky, and a colder wind blew across the sleeping warriors and made the horses whinny plaintively. The Scadori seemed completely indifferent to the cold.

On the morning of the seventh day they climbed through a final pass and came out on a high plateau. A few miles farther on was a small lake, and everyone stripped and plunged into the icy water. Blade managed to keep his teeth from chattering loudly enough to be heard, and enjoyed feeling at least some of the dirt wash away from his skin. After refilling their water bags, they ate a quick meal of cold dried

meat and the march began again. The sun passed overhead and began to slide down toward a distant flat horizon. As the western sky began to turn red, Blade saw a conical shape rising from the plain against the redness. Its top and sides were studded with humps and blocks.

"Ukush," said Chudo briefly.

"Your home?"

"Yes." He turned to the warriors behind them. "Take the heavy things from the horses. The Blade and I will enter Ukush riding. Let whoever has a pipe play a death-tune for Urgo, for we must give his spirit what it deserves." He winked at Blade as he said this.

Blade slowly and carefully mounted the horse Chudo offered him. The horse was not skittish or hostile, fortunately. It had been starved into apathy and was so gaunt that Blade was more worried about its collapsing under his weight. It had obviously been a fine gray once, small but extremely sturdy and with a high proud head, probably a mount of one of the Riders of Death. Now Blade was glad he did not have to ride it more than a few miles or faster than the gentlest of trots.

Chudo also mounted up and two of the warriors pulled out short pipes and began playing a tune that was either improvised or something they knew very badly and played even worse. Blade gently urged his horse into motion and the little procession of returning warriors tramped out across the plain toward Ukush.

They began to see herds of gaunt piebald cattle. The herders and guards waved to them as they passed. Beyond the cattle were fields, the rocky soil dark and bare now, surrounded by walls of loose stones piled just high enough to discourage the half-starved cattle. Under the darkening sky, with the bloody glow in the west, it was a grim, dreary sight.

As they moved closer to Ukush, Blade saw thin trails of smoke smudging the sky above the town as small fires tried to make headway against the chill winds. Dung fires, no doubt, or perhaps peat if the Scadori were lucky. Blade hadn't seen a tree since they reached the plateau, and damned few in the hills below the pass!

Around the base of Ukush's hill rose another wall, this one of earth mounded ten feet high and covered on the outer face with stones. They passed through a gap in the wall flanked with massive boulders perched on top of the wall to either side.

"When another tribe fights us we bring the cattle and the people inside the walls. Then strong men push the big rocks down into the open space. No one can get in easily as long as our warriors stand on the walls with weapons in their hands."

"Are such wars common?"

"You would like to fight, Blade?"

"I am a warrior. It is my way of life to have enemies and fight them."

"Good. But we in Scador do not fight much among ourselves now. I think you will be among us many years before you help defend the walls of Ukush against other Scadori."

"But it will not be long before I fight the Karani, I hope?" Blade did his best to seem eager almost to the

point of being bloodthirsty.

"You want to fight beside us, do you?"

"You have taken me in among you when you might have thought I killed Urgo by trickery and sent my spirit to join his."

"It is so. Then you will share in the next battle with the Karani, and all the battles with them after that until there are no more to fight."

"Or until I die," put in Blade. "No warrior can be certain that will not happen."

"No," said Chudo. He grinned. "But I do not think it will happen to you. I think you will fight the Karani and kill so many that in three years you will have five Karani women all to yourself. And you will also have Tera."

"Who is Tera?"

"She is Urgo's woman. She is seventeen, and so beautiful that I think the light of the Watcher of the Day Sky must be in her. But she bore Urgo no children, and has a stronger spirit than is right in a woman. So he had to beat her often, and it twisted her spirit. Beware of her, for all her beauty. She might try to stick your own sword in your guts some night if you are not careful."

"Thank you for the warning," said Blade. He was about to add, "I will start off by not beating her for a while, to see if that untwists her spirit." Then he realized that Chudo would hardly understand the idea. He might not think Blade a coward, too weak to treat a woman as she deserved. But he might think that the new warrior who had come among the Scadori was a madman, and say so. That could cause talk, which Blade did not need. Anything that could make him a suspicious character would make it harder for him to slip quietly off toward the lowlands and the Karani.

The lower slopes of the hill inside the wall were empty, the earth trampled bare and hard in many places. Above it was a ring of shops. Smoke and clanging sounds rose from what was obviously a forge. Farther around the circle was a butcher's shop, with a horrible pile of bones and entrails beside it. Blade was glad that the weather was cold and the wind blowing from him toward the pile. He hoped he could get out of Ukush before hot weather came, and with it a host of frightful smells.

Part of the ring of shops was given over to stables. Like all the other buildings they were built of stones and turf, thickwalled, low, with roofs of hides sewn together and stretched over frames of bone. As Blade dismounted, a warrior nearly as large as Urgo stepped out from between two stables. He wore only leather breeches and a knife at his waist, and the hair of his beard and his massive chest was gray.

"Where is Urgo?"

Chudo pointed at Blade. "We found this warrior named Blade from a distant land traveling in the hills to the south. Urgo said too much, as usual. He thought the warrior Blade would be easy and pleasant to kill because he was naked and unarmed. But Blade fought Urgo naked with only his hands, and killed him. Now he leads our band. His customs are strange, but he is a mighty warrior, so they must not be bad customs."

The gray-haired warrior's broad face split apart in an even broader smile. He stepped forward and threw both arms around Blade, pulling him against his barrel chest until Blade felt that his own ribs would

crack. "That great maker of loud noises is dead! Praise to the Watchers! Now perhaps my daughter will no longer be called barren, to the shame of my family. It cannot be that she was barren. It must have been that Urgo could not do what a man does, and threw the shame down on her like a rock from a high place. But now he is dead, dead, dead!"

Blade didn't follow this, but the man's bear hug had squeezed all the breath out of him. The man noticed Blade's confusion.

"Ah, Blade, I see you do not know. Tera, the woman who was Urgo's and will now be yours, is my daughter. My name is Degar."

They clasped right hands and placed their left hands on the hilts of each other's weapons. In Scador that was the gesture of greeting between men who were not only friendly toward each other, but did not expect to ever become enemies.

Degar said, "It is good that Urgo is slain, for now my daughter will go to a man who will see that she bears a child and takes away the shame from my house."

Chudo said farewell to Blade and promised to come to his house tomorrow to tell him more of what he must know to be a warrior of Scador. Then he turned back to the rest of the band, while Degar led Blade through the alley between the stables and up into the streets of Ukush. The streets were hardly wider than the alley and nearly as dark and smelly. Only occasional dim flickers of light crept around the hides drawn across the low doors of the huts and houses, to fall on the worn and age-blackened stones underfoot. Blade heard drunken singing, children crying, the sound of someone being violently sick. Above everything rose the continuous faint moan of the chill wind. Blade realized that in winter Ukush must be a grim stony hell of shrieking wind and snow flying like shotgun pellets.

Degar stopped before a house with red checker patterns painted on stones on either side of the doorway and a white diamond painted on the bleached and cracking hide of the door itself. "This is the house of Urgo." He drew his knife and rapped smartly on one of the stones by the doorway with the hilt. "Ho, in the house of Urgo! I bring the new master, the warrior Blade, who has slain Urgo and will claim his rights on this house and all in it."

A flurry of low muttering voices, a flurry of scuttling feet, and the hide door was pulled aside. An old woman peered out, one eye in her thin brown face filmed over with white, the other dark and piercing. "Enter, Degar, and enter, Blade, that we may do you honor in this that is now your house. What is your wish?" She seemed quite unsurprised at the turn of events. No doubt she had been passed from one master to another half a dozen times in her life.

Blade drew himself up to his full height to make a proper entrance, then noticed that the doorway was barely five feet high. So he bowed head and shoulders with as much dignity as he could manage, and led Degar into the house.

Inside, the ceiling was no higher than the doorway. The bones and bits of wood that held the hide taut, the hide itself, the stone walls—all were black with years or even centuries of soot. The air was chill, heavy with the smells of smoke and grease and filth, as though it had crept into the house many years ago and been there unchanged ever since. But at least it was warmer here, thanks to a small fire burning in a circle of stones in the center of the main room. The smoke of the fire was supposed to rise up through a small hole in the roof. Some of it actually did. The rest of it filled the house, eddying to and fro.

For the first time in many hours Blade could no longer hear the endless whine of the wind. That alone

was enough to make him feel that the house was almost luxurious.

The old woman led Blade to a seat by the fire. The seat was a large flat rock with layers of hides piled over it. Blade sat down, while Degar crossed the room to an even lower door set in the far wall.

"Tera! Come forth to meet your new master! Come forth to see he whose will shall be over yours from this night on!" There was a stirring in the darkness beyond the door, a small squeal of pain or surprise, and Degar reappeared, dragging a young woman.

Very young, in fact. But then Blade remembered that seventeen was very young only by Home Dimension standards. Here in Scador she had doubtless been considered a grown woman at fourteen. She would be old at forty, if she was still alive.

But now she was seventeen, and as Blade looked at her his eyes widened. Tera was beautiful. More beautiful than he had expected, almost more beautiful than he could believe in someone from this barbaric people living in their harsh, chill land. She was barely five feet tall and exquisitely formed. Huge dark eyes stared out at him from a face that missed being perfect only through the square lines of its jaw, and a great mass of dark brown hair poured down her back and over her-shoulders. It was matted and filthy, and right now her father had a firm grip on it. But Blade could not help imagining how that hair might look, clean and flowing. Or how the rest of Tera might look, stripped of the shapeless garment of hides that concealed her from neck to ankles and left bare only face, feet, and slim arms.

Degar released his daughter and made a sharp gesture with one hand. She nodded submissively, reached down to the hem of the garment, and pulled it over her head. Her nude body kept the promise of the rest of her, with small perfect breasts, slim waist, beautifully molded legs. Blade felt desire rising in him more quickly than it had for any woman in years.

"Is she not pleasing, Blade?"

"She is very pleasing, Degar." The sincere enthusiasm in his voice made the warrior smile.

"She is small, and she has Nessiri blood in her through her mother. But is she not, in spite of that, formed to bear the sons of warriors?" The Nessiri were a people living to the south of Scador and east of Karan, a people of hunters and fishermen who fought both Scadori and Karani.

"She is." As Blade spoke, Tera did a quick twirl on her small feet, showing herself off with a smile of pride on her face. She obviously knew just how desirable a man should find her.

"Can you believe that it is her fault that shame has come on my house because she has borne no sons? Can you believe that it was not the fault of Uργο, unable to do what a man should do?"

"Uργο indeed must have been as weak in his manhood as in his head," said Blade. He looked Tera up and down, letting his face show all the appreciation and desire he felt. Her smile broadened. "A warrior of my people must fast and keep vigil after battle, before he can take a woman. This I have not done on the journey here. When I have done that, Tera will find that my manhood is as strong as my arms." He flexed his arm and shoulder muscles. It would have been even more dramatic if he had been able to show a full erection, but he hadn't quite reached that point yet.

Tera's smile faded, and Degar frowned. "You speak the truth in this? It is the way of your warriors?"

Blade hardened his own voice and expression. "It is so. I am not as Uργο. There will be unhappiness

between us, Degar, if you again doubt what I say."

Blade did not want to start his life in Ukush by a quarrel with Degar. But among these people he doubted if he could let anyone call him a liar without losing reputation. He hoped his choice of words had struck the right balance.

Apparently it had. Degar shrugged his massive shoulders, then turned to his daughter. "There will be a time yet, girl, or this Blade shall tell me why." His face softened for a moment as he gazed at his daughter. Then he turned and strode out without another word.

Tera stood, still naked and looking down at the floor. "Shall I cover myself, Blade?" she said softly.

Blade laughed. "You shall not, Tera. Why should you cover yourself just before I take you?"

Tera's mouth dropped open and she clapped both hands to her breasts with a little gasp. When she could speak, she could only stammer, "But-but the laws-your people-"

"There are things no laws of any people can make a man do when he has his manhood," said Blade with a grin. "One of them is not to reach out for a woman such as you are, and do with her all that he can for as long as he can." Tera giggled in delight and anticipation. Blade turned to the old woman.

"You shall keep silent on all that passes tonight. Or you will not have a tooth in your head tomorrow morning. Do you understand?"

"Yes, master." The woman bowed so deeply that her forehead nearly touched the floor.

"Good." Blade stepped forward and scooped Tera up in his arms. She was as light as he had expected. He carried her through the inner door into a tiny sleeping room, then laid her down on the furs that gave the floor a little softness. She lay back, hair making a fan around her head, legs spread nearly as wide, wearing nothing but a smile that seemed to light up the whole gloomy chamber. Blade felt desire rising in him again as he began stripping off his clothes. Tera's eyes widened at the sight of his erect maleness. But the smile never left her face, and her hips began to move slowly, with an almost liquid motion.

Then Blade lay down and surged into her. She was snug, but warm and wet and totally receptive and welcoming. He began thrusting, and she began moving faster. Slim arms came up to wrap around his neck; the superbly molded legs rose to clamp around his hips with more strength than he thought they had in them. Her teeth tightened painfully on his left ear. But he barely felt the pain in the rising joy and delight he felt as he moved inside Tera and she moved around him. He felt nothing except this woman and what was happening between them.

Her breathing came faster, and he felt the hard little points of rigid nipples against his chest. He pressed down on her harder, not worrying that she might be fragile, not thinking of anything except doing all that this woman would let him do. Could he last that long? He sensed that this woman might be more than his match. There were years and years of pent-up desire in Tera, and she would be spending it all on him, here and now.

Yet in the end it was Tera who first cried out, shrilly and wildly, who first twisted and writhed still more wildly under Blade's thrusts, who locked her legs still more tightly about him and tossed her head about until her hair flowed over Blade's head. Then she was sobbing and whimpering as her spasm passed. A second came, and with that Blade reached his own climax and writhed and heaved as he groaned and poured himself into her.

Eventually they found the strength to untangle themselves. Blade became aware that it was chilly in the little chamber, and pulled some of the piled furs over them. The furs stank and probably swarmed with vermin, but he hardly cared about that now. Certainly he did not care about that one-tenth as much as he cared about Tera. She was indeed a woman and an unusual one, with more to know in her and find out about her than many Home Dimension women twice her age. Blade did not know if he loved her or indeed would ever love her. But he knew even now that he cared very much what happened to her.

Chapter 5

Tera was more than willing to keep the secret of Blade's violation of his people's "taboo." In fact she seemed to find it a good joke to let it be believed for several days that the relationship between her and Blade was still unconsummated.

However, Blade could not get out of doing what he said he had to do. So on the third day he went out on the walls of Ukush and sat there all of one day and all the night until dawn. He stayed in lotus position most of the time and neither ate, drank, nor spoke to anyone. This made the vigil more dramatic and impressed everyone who saw him with his great strength of will and the power of his people's taboos.

After that he went back to the house and Tera's warm welcome and even warmer arms. When word got around that Tera was smiling and singing at her work, other warriors began to slap Blade on the back and shout bawdy congratulations. Degar also congratulated Blade, but more soberly. He gave him a captured Karani sword that must have once belonged to a high-ranking officer, for it had a gold hilt with a ruby set in it. He also promised Blade the command of as many warriors as he thought he could get to follow him, when the Scadori next marched into Karan.

"When will that be?" Blade asked. The sooner the war began, the sooner he could be out of Scador. But--did he want to leave, now that there was Tera?

"The high chiefs will meet in twenty days to decide who will go. Those who will be marching will start preparing then. They will march as soon as we have food and the snow is gone from the pass into Karan. The weather grows warmer, so that will be no more than twenty more days."

Six weeks, roughly, before the Scadori marched down into Karan. That was good, in a way. It meant he could get among the Karani faster than he had expected, long before the next winter froze the grim plateau and hills where the Scadori lived.

But there was Tera, something Blade had not expected. He did not want to leave her alone in the chill, dark house in Ukush. When it was obvious that Blade was not coming back, she would be passed on to some other warrior, who might treat her as badly as Urgo had. And suppose word reached to Ukush that Blade had deserted to the hated Karani? What would happen to Tera then?

Take Tera with him when he fled? How? That would mean taking her on the march into the lowlands, and would he be allowed to take her even if she could endure the march? Would she want to escape with him even if she had the chance, to live among the hereditary enemies of her people? He could hardly force her if she didn't want to go. Besides, the Karani might kill him on sight, however civilized they might be. What would happen to Tera then, if she was with him, would be worse than anything she might suffer by staying in Ukush among her people.

Damn! There were risks either way. But one thing was certain. Blade did not want to leave Tera behind until the last possible moment. He decided to take her along with him, if that was possible and she could

stand it. Then he could play the rest by ear.

That turned out to be easier than he had expected. Leaders of more than fifty men had the right to take a woman with them when the Scadori went to war, a woman who would be theirs alone. So all Blade had to do was make Tera that in barely a month he was a leader of fifty men or more.

That was not quite so easy. It meant many hours of weapons practice each day. It also meant a few fights. No one wanted to avenge Urgo or take Tera. But a few warriors seemed to resent the prospect of this stranger who had wandered in from nowhere leading them into battle. A few of them said a little too much, and Blade had to challenge them. He put down quickly those who fought against him with weapons, but took more time with those who had the courage to come against him barehanded. He wanted such brave men to look as good as possible. This helped win the friendship of several of them.

The practice with both the weapons of Scador and those captured from the Karani was easy. Blade could already handle all of them with a formidable skill that impressed everyone who watched him and impressed even more those who fought against him.

"I hope your land is so far away that its warriors will never march against us," Degar said one day, after watching Blade in action. "If they ever did, they would be an enemy far harder to beat than even the Riders of Death of Karan. Or are most of your people's warriors less skilled than you?"

Blade shook his head. "Some are less skilled, that is true. But there are just as many still stronger and faster and more skilled than I am. Not bigger, though-I do not come from a race of giants." That last admission seemed to make Degar feel a little better.

So the days passed, as Blade practiced and trained from dawn to dark, gradually gathering followers. As darkness crept over the plateau and the western sky turned red, he would make his way to his house and the hot meal and warm welcome Tera would always have waiting for him. Before long, he was envied not only for his skill with weapons, but for his skill in properly taming the proud and strong-spirited Tera. Both of them found the praise heaped on Blade for this amusing, but they carefully kept it a private joke.

As the days passed, night was slower in coming, the wind lost some of its chill, and the fields and plains beyond began to show spots of color. By now Blade could be sure that he would have command of more than fifty warriors of Scador when the time came to march against the Karani. He would have no trouble taking Tera with him, although he was still far from certain what he should do with her. He knew that he did not want to leave her, but he was still not sure if it would be the right thing to take her with him among the Karani.

Nearly the six weeks Degar had predicted passed before the word to march came down from the High Chiefs. All normal life in Ukush came to a stop, as everyone turned to getting the warriors of the town ready to depart. Dried meat and bread and beer, weapons and newly polished and greased armor, spare boots, stirrups and harnesses and bags of fodder for the leaders' horses-they piled up hour by hour. Two out of every three warriors were chosen by lot to march out. Those who stayed behind were to guard Ukush, and if necessary train the young boys whose fathers did not return.

The two hundred warriors of Ukush gathered just outside the wall one morning, with the eastern sky just turning pink and the night's chill still in the air. Degar led one-third of the two hundred, Blade another third, a man Blade knew only as Jarud led the remaining third. Degar and Jarud each brought a woman of their own, making things simpler for Blade. It might have looked odd for him to be the only leader to take his "home comforts" with him.

Besides the leaders' women, there were a score more for the service of the warriors. Most of these were Karani or Nessiri prisoners or women of Scador enslaved for one or another sort of misbehavior. There were also a score of older men and younger boys to feed the horses, build the fires, clean armor and weapons, and do the rest of the dirty work. Altogether, nearly two hundred and fifty of Ukush's people marched out across the plateau when Degar's trumpeter blew the signal.

Looking back over his shoulder, Blade could see Tera tramping along with a long, free stride in her proper place behind his horse. Behind her the column of the men he led trailed away across the hard bare earth and short grass toward Ukush. The walls of the town were lined with those left behind, cheering, shouting, beating on drums, and waving everything they could wave.

Blade found that he was not quite as happy about leaving Ukush behind as he had expected to be. The way of life and customs there were not his. But the Scadori had welcomed him, a stranger, and given him as much of a home as they could.

Gradually Ukush on its hill sank into the plateau, and within an hour it was gone, vanished below the horizon. The warriors marched steadily forward behind their leaders, the women and servants following them. Occasionally someone would sing one of Scador's harsh, bellowing war songs. Otherwise there was no sound but the hooves of the horses and the feet of the marchers on the hard ground, and above them all the endless whisper and moan of the wind.

Chapter 6

The march across the plateau went on for several days. One by one, other columns of the warriors of Scador marched up over the horizon and joined the men of Ukush. By the tenth day, over three thousand warriors and five hundred camp followers were marching steadily on in a single great column.

By now Blade knew they were marching north. The nights were almost as chilly as they had been in Ukush before spring came. Blade found Tera snuggling closer to him at night, and seldom took off his clothes even to air them out. Washing was out of the question. The occasional pond or spring provided just enough water to fill the water bags and drinking bottles.

On the thirteenth day Blade saw snow-covered summits lifting over the horizon to the north and northwest. About noon on that day the whole column swung off toward the northwest. A dozen of the more experienced warriors mounted up on leaders' horses and rode off ahead of the column as scouts. They were approaching the northern end of the plateau, and the pass that led the Scadori through the mountains and down into the lowlands. The Karani had never fortified or garrisoned that pass in all the centuries the Scadori had been fighting them. But none of the leaders wanted to take any chances. The Scadori had learned much from the wars. It was possible that the Karani had done the same.

The column camped for the night several hours earlier than usual, just out of sight of the pass. Blade found Tera wilder in her passion that night than ever before. She knew as well as Blade did that the march was over and the fighting about to begin.

"I would be unhappy to be apart from you for the rest of my life," she said with a sigh. "I pray every hour to the Watchers that other warriors may fall, but not you. It is not a good prayer, and I do not know if the Watchers will answer. But I hope they will."

"We must all bow to the Watchers," said Blade. "I pray, rather, that I do not fail those who follow me through any lack of skill or courage. I also pray to do my best in our battles. If that is granted, I think we

will not be apart when the fighting is over." Blade knew that might very well turn out to be a lie, if he chose to flee to the Karani without her. But if he ended up leaving Tera, why not let her think he had met his death in battle? She would suffer enough as it was.

The camp awoke long before dawn, as soon as the scouts returned to report that the pass was clear. Several hundred fur-clad warriors with stoneheaded axes and spears marched in from the mountain-dwelling tribes, to join the column. Two of the clans whose warriors were expected did not appear, but this seemed a minor detail. When the column set out on its march in the darkness, it was nearly four thousand strong.

They climbed up to the peak of the pass in the early dawn and crossed it before full daylight. As the sky overhead turned blue, Blade could look down the slopes of the mountains to the green lowlands at the bottom, dotted with the silver of lakes and the dark green of forests. Miles away a few curls of smoke rose from the chimneys of farms and villages. Their people would not live to see sunset, and would be lucky to die quickly and cleanly.

There were no signs of any large Karani force nearby. No smoke from campfires, no glint of sun on armor, no dust clouds that the Riders of Death on the march might have thrown up.

Degar shrugged. "How could they get ready for us, anyway? They cannot watch us from the mountain tops to see us coming across the plains. The Emperor's soldiers will only know that we have come when the farmers who outrun us reach the nearest garrison. That will be several days. It will be several days more before they come to us.

Even then we may not see the Riders of Death. Often they do not leave Karanopolis for a whole year at a time, even to fight us."

"Good." Blade was not quite speaking his mind. If it would be a week before they were fighting Karani soldiers, it would be a week before he could safely leave the Scadori, with or without Tera. He could not leave unnoticed until there was enough fighting so that the "fog of war" would hide him. He might not be able to leave at all if the Karani did not react fast enough.

His staying would make Tera happy, of course. But meanwhile he would have to march with the Scadori. He would see farms burning, farmers slaughtered, their women raped and then kidnapped, their children shot full of arrows, and many other things he would rather not see, let alone help do.

By noon the whole army of Scador was out of the pass. The warriors in the lead were several miles out into Karani lands. Soon they were passing little mounds of blackened stones that showed where farms had once stood. The Karani peasants were obviously born optimists, to go on building and farming so close to the normal invasion route of the enemy. But by now word had probably reached the nearer farms that the Scadori were coming, and at least the women and children would be on their way to safety as fast as they could go. Blade hoped so. The afternoon wore on. They came to the first farms-already abandoned, as Blade had hoped. Some of the livestock had not been driven off, though. Blade heard the protesting baaing of sheep and the lowing of cattle as they were slaughtered for the warriors' dinner. The prospect of fresh meat appealed to Blade. The food he had brought from Ukush had lasted this long only by his skipping a meal each day. Tera would gladly have given up half her food to him, but he would not let her do that.

"No warrior of my people would starve his woman to maintain his own strength. If he was that weak, he would be sent back to the camps of the boys for more training in what a warrior must do."

"There must be terrible strength in your warriors, for them to do this."

"There is. There is also the belief that it is a great evil to hurt a woman unless she has done a wrong to you." Blade had reached down then, and stroked Tera's long hair. It was clean now, for he had taught her to wash it once a week. "You have done nothing wrong to me."

"And I shall not, Blade. That would be evil of me." Her smile showed love that was almost worship.

They made camp for the night several miles beyond the first farms. Clouds of smoke from the burning buildings smudged the sky behind them. Other clouds of smoke soon rose from campfires, and soon after that the smell of roasting meat. One by one the warriors of Scador relaxed, enjoying the pleasure of sitting or lying on soft earth that smelled of growing things.

They were obviously enjoying this so much that Blade began to worry about how to keep an alert watch during the night. He had heard a dozen times that the Karani did not attack by night. Therefore it seemed likely to Blade that the Karani would do just exactly that, if they had any troops in the area. But as the scouts rode back from the surrounding countryside, even Blade began to believe that Degar was right. The nearest Karani soldier must be a good many miles away.

There was not enough of the roast meat to go around, so Blade got only enough to feed Tera. She obviously thought he was mad to treat his woman so well. But it was a madness that made her very happy. She squatted down at the door of their little tent and tore into the meat.

Blade spent the rest of the evening walking around the camp, helping to keep order among the hungry warriors and ignoring the rumblings of his own stomach. Well after dark he returned to the tent to find Tera already sound asleep. He decided to let her sleep, and gently stroked her hair. Damn it! Everything seemed to be making it harder and harder for him to decide a question he had to answer. Take Tera or leave her? He was even beginning to wonder if he was losing the power of quick and easy decision-making. That would be a problem.

An explosion of trumpet blasts and shouting jerked Blade out of a sound sleep. He sat up and listened. Some of the trumpets were the flat-toned animal-horn instruments of Scador. But others were deeper, louder, with a brassy note in their calls. From the same direction came shouts of "Forward! Forward for the Emperor!"

Blade leaped to his feet so fast that he smashed his head into the ridgepole of the tent. Ignoring this, he knelt to snatch up weapons and clothing. Tera sprang up, stark naked, and began wriggling swiftly into her own leather tunic and trousers. Her eyes were wide and she was obviously keeping her jaw clamped shut to keep her teeth from chattering in fear.

Blade finished pulling on his clothes and both swords, then grabbed a helmet with one hand and a spear with the other. He plunged out of the tent, brandishing the spear and clapping the helmet on his head as he ran.

It was still dark, and the only light was the embers from the dying campfires. Scadori warriors were dashing about like escaped madmen, stumbling over tent ropes, crashing into one another, swearing and shouting. The screams of the women rose above the shouting. But they could not drown out the war-cries and trumpets of the attacking army, or the mounting clang and crash of weapons as the Scadori ran to meet the attack.

Blade followed the sound, clearing a path with shouts and elbows and flourishes of his spear. He

reached the improvised Scadori battle line just as fresh Karani soldiers came storming out of the woods. The uproar swelled, with more trumpet calls, more clang of weapons, the crunching of bushes being trampled underfoot, and the screams of dying men.

Blade's eyes had fully adjusted to the darkness now. He saw the dying firelight reflected off the round helmets, the breastplates and greaves, the rectangular shields of the Karani infantry. He came up to the fighting line between two Scadori warriors, just as six of the enemy chose the same place as their point of attack.

Blade's arm rose and snapped forward. His spear darted between the two Scadori and took the leading attacker in the throat before he could raise his shield. He gurgled, reeled, sprayed blood right and left, then tottered backward into the path of his five comrades. They bunched up, taking a few extra seconds to go around him.

In those few seconds Blade was on them. He no longer cared that the Karani were civilized, that he wanted to leave the Scadori and join them. He was only a fighting man as he charged, almost a fighting animal, thinking of nothing but striking down his enemies and defending himself and his woman. He no longer cared who the Karani were, and would not have stopped or spared these five even if he had remembered.

Both swords were in his hands as he reached the enemy. The broadsword in his right hand crashed down on top of a Karani shield so hard that it drove the shield down and clanged into the man's helmet. He staggered, but kept on his feet and backed away half-stunned, leaving his neighbor's flank open. Blade was around that flank in a moment, short sword in his left hand stabbing in past the man's shield before he could swing it around. The point went through the man's heavy leather thigh guards and deep into his thigh. He screamed, and was still screaming as Blade's broadsword whipped around and sheared through his neck. His head flew one way, his body toppled another. Blood spouted high, drenching Blade and the two Scadori warriors now coming up to help him.

One of them took out Blade's fourth opponent, feinting with a sword in one hand and then stabbing low with a spear in the other. But the mortally wounded Karani soldier stumbled forward, short sword darting in and out. The Scadori screamed and the two men fell, kicking and clawing at the earth and at each other with the last of their strength. Blade stepped back as half a dozen more Karani ran in, literally dragging the other Scadori warrior with him by the hair. The man glared at Blade, then still more of the enemy were on them, and there was no time to argue or do anything else except fight for their lives.

How long the battle for the camp went on, Blade never knew. For a while it was just one explosion of slashing and thrusting and grappling hand-to-hand after another. Then the Scadori line began to stiffen, as the leaders ran up and down behind it. They shifted men from one part of the line to another. They helped wounded men out of the line to where the women and the servants could do as much as possible for them. They gave dying men a quick, merciful death with their swords. They rallied the warriors when the Karani came on more fiercely than usual.

Once the Karani broke clear through the line, and a dozen of them ran wildly about the camp, stabbing and slashing at the women and the wounded. Blade found himself fighting side by side with Degar and Chudo, at the head of a score of warriors who ran to seal off the break in the line. Then when the break was sealed, there was a deadly stalking hunt among the tents until the last of the Karani lay screaming and writhing in the campfire where Blade threw him. The smell of burning human flesh rose into the air, to add itself to all the other smells that made the air over the camp sickeningly heavy.

Blade did not know how long the battle went on. But he did know that eventually it ended. Covered

with blood, none of it his own, Blade stood with Degar and watched the Karani infantry form up and retreat slowly into the cover of the forest. A few bold Scadori tried to follow them, but well-thrown spears from the enemy's rear guard brought them down. Then there was only the fading crackle of branches, the regular tramping of feet, and occasional shouted orders as the Karani marched away.

Degar turned to Blade. He also was covered with blood, some of it his own, although none of his wounds were serious. He heaved a sigh of relief, but his face was grim.

"This was a night of mysteries as well as one of battle, Blade. But it is no mystery what we must do. Our march into the lands of the Karani cannot go on, now that they are alerted and present in strength. We must march back to Scador."

Blade had to agree. The rising sun shone down on at least six or seven hundred bodies lying along the edge of the camp. More than half were Scadori. Many more of Scador's warriors lay wounded or dying in the tents behind. Blade could hear their moans as he stood. The surprise attack, their superior armor, and their discipline had given the Karani the edge they usually had in a stand-up fight.

Degar went on. "I do not know how the infantry was so far away last night that our scouts could not find them, yet close enough to attack in the night. If they had not been forced to attack through the forest, they would have overrun the camp while we still struggled up from sleep. Then the sun would be shining down on your body and mine and Tera's as well." Hardened warrior as he was, Degar could not keep from shuddering at the thought. Blade had a moment's vision of Tera screaming and writhing under the pounding bodies of a succession of Karani soldiers, and almost shuddered himself.

"Another mystery is where the horsemen are," said Degar. "The Riders of Death do not often come out. But an army of Karan always has horsemen somewhere nearby. If they had struck us on one side or the other while we fought off the infantry..." This time he found the idea too disturbing to even finish the sentence.

"Yes," said Blade. "We've been lucky to escape as lightly as we have. But let us get ready to march, or the Watchers may take good fortune away from us and give it to the Karani. This talk of mysteries is to ask questions that we shall not be answering here and now."

Degar nodded slowly. "You speak truly, Blade. It is time to admit that this night the Karani have won, and see that they do not win again." He turned away and began shouting orders.

Chapter 7

The raiders of Scador were on the march back toward the pass before the sun was much higher in the sky. The High Chiefs sent off two hundred archers as soon as the battle was over, to march straight to the pass and hold it to the death. The Karani had never attempted to seize the pass before. But then, they had never made a night attack before. Fear of the unknown now filled the warriors of Scador. What new surprise was the enemy going to spring on them? Blade saw veterans of a dozen raids into Karan looking about them as though they expected the Riders of Death to sprout from the ground like grass or fly down from the sky like eagles.

Blade and the fifty-odd survivors of his band formed part of the rear guard, four hundred strong. All of them were warriors, except Tera. Blade would have sent her up to the main body where she would be under her father's protection. But she refused to leave Blade's side just as stubbornly as he had refused to eat her share of the food on the march.

"I will live in shame if I am not as strong and brave in a woman's way as you are in a warrior's way," she said. "Would you have me live that way?" There was no good answer to that. So Tera tramped along in her usual place behind Blade's horse as the army of Scador wound its way up out of the lowlands toward the pass.

Blade was not marching with the rear guard in any hope of fleeing to the Karani. He knew that would have to wait until another time and another raid. That might be quite awhile. But in the meantime he would be honored among the Scadori. Besides, there was Tera.

But he did want to observe Karani fighting methods more closely. That was just common sense, and also an unbreakable habit. The rear guard was most likely to see more fighting today, and therefore the best place for Blade.

As the sun rose higher, Blade found sweat pouring down his body, itching horribly under his armor and leather and mixing itself with the caked blood that he hadn't found the time or water to wash off. Gradually the army climbed upward, the landscape around them showed more rocks and less grass and trees, and the air turned cooler. The mountains flanking the pass began to loom higher and higher against the blue sky.

The bare land stretched farther and farther on either side. They were not yet above the tree line, but the nearest stand of forest that could give cover to any sizable force was now a good two miles away. No force of heavily equipped Karani infantry could cross those miles without being seen, or strike before the Scadori were formed and ready to fight. In fact, they might never even reach the Scadori. On a long uphill run, a warrior of Scador could easily leave the best and toughest Karani soldier panting far behind.

But what was that glint of sunlight on metal, on the fringes of that distant stand of woods? Blade shaded his eyes with his hands and looked. The sunlight was unmistakably glinting from the armor of horsemen swarming out of the forest. Some of the leaders were already beginning to sweep out across the open slopes, toward the Scadori. Blade opened his mouth to shout a warning.

Before he could take a single deep breath a dozen others shouted the warning for him. "Ho! Ha! Ha! Stand, stand and pray to the Watchers! The Riders of Death come! The Riders of Death are upon us!"

For once, four hundred warriors of Scador seemed ready to panic. Some took to their heels, dashing away up the slope, hoping to reach whatever protection they might find in the main body and in the rough ground closer to the pass. Others, even more panic-stricken, ran wildly off in directions that offered no hope at all of safety. A few threw their weapons down on the ground and knelt, crossing their arms and bowing their heads in prayer.

Blade leaped out of the saddle, drawing his broadsword with one hand and grabbing Tera around the waist with the other. He practically heaved her into the saddle. She clutched the reins by instinct, tottered, but stayed on the horse.

"Ride! Ride, woman! Ride for the pass and for Degar! Pray for yourself until you get there, and for the rest of us when you are safe!" He slapped the horse on the rump. It whinnied and started off up-slope. Tera screamed back at him, eyes wide.

"Blade, I will not-!"

"Yes, you will!" he roared. "You will not disobey me this time, I swear by the Watchers!"

Tera threw a frantic, pleading look at him, her face twisted more in fear for him than for herself. But the horse was gathering speed, and her desperate pulls on the reins had no effect. Blade could only hope that she could stop the beast at the pass or that someone could stop it for her. Then he put her out of his mind and turned back to rally the rear guard. Once again he was thinking only as a fighter, a fighter determined to go out on his feet. The Karani were the enemy, and that was all they were.

His voice roared out above the prayers, the shouts, and the mounting thunder of the approaching Riders. "Stand and fight, you crawling black bugs, or you won't live for the Karani to kill you!" He brandished both of his swords so that dazzling light glinted from them and he seemed to be waving fire above his head. "Stand and give those high-riding swine a fight they'll remember if they live through it! Stand and give them a fight until our comrades are safe in the pass! We'll have our comrades' prayers and the prayers of their sons and their women when we go to the Watchers! Stand, and be warriors of Scador and not pigs or mongrel dogs or things that crawl in the dust!"

Every man in the rear guard heard him. The Riders of Death more than a mile away could have heard him! The Scadori who were starting to flee froze in their tracks.

Some of those who had already run started back to join their comrades, shouting war cries as they came. A solid square of warriors formed around Blade almost as he watched. He saw Jarud shouting and pushing warriors into position along one side of the square, and called to him.

"Jarud! When I fall, the leadership is yours!" Jarud pressed the tip of his sword to his forehead in the traditional sign of sworn obedience and turned back to his work. Blade found the highest patch of ground inside the square and stared out over the heads of the warriors at the approaching Riders of Death.

He got a good look at them, as the rough ground slowed them bit by bit from a gallop to a trot. But the horses were sure-footed and the Riders skilled, and they came on steadily, five hundred or more of them in a long crescent half a mile from tip to tip. Deep-voiced Karani trumpets sounded as they came on, and above the center of the crescent floated a long banner, something black glistening in the middle of a dark red field.

Each Rider wore a silvered helmet and breastplate, and more silver highlighted harnesses and weapons. The weapons included a short thick bow, two swords, one long and one short, a quiver of arrows and another of long throwing darts, and light eight-foot lances with silvered heads and small blue pennants. Slung on their backs over the quivers were small round shields.

Blade couldn't help wondering if the Riders of Death got themselves up like mobile arsenals just to impress people, or if they could really use all the hardware they carried around. Certainly the tales he had heard said they could. Even more certainly they were coming on, steadily holding formation like disciplined and trained men. But around him, Blade could see that the Scadori were also holding their square. They might not be professionals, but they were warriors determined to make their last fight a good one.

Four hundred yards out; the Karani unslung their bows and snatched arrows from their quivers. At three hundred yards they opened fire. Arrows whistled down out of the sky, striking hard enough to drive through armor. But unless they were mortally hit, the Scadori stayed on their feet. Blade saw Jarud grit his teeth, snap off an arrow driven clean through his shoulder, throw both pieces away, and shift his spear to his other hand. Scadori did go down, but as warriors fell or crawled away, others moved up to take their places in the outer rank of the square. Blade realized that he didn't need to give any more orders. Now that he had rallied them from their first panic, the Scadori would fight as long and as well as possible. He gripped broadsword and spear until his knuckles stood out white under the calluses and

grime, and waited.

The Riders kept up their arrow fire as their line slowly curved around the Scadori square, folding the wings of the crescent around it. When all the Riders were within a hundred yards, the bows were slung and the darts came out. The name "darts" seemed too innocent for what the Riders brandished now. They were more like thick-shafted miniature spears, three feet long, finned and balanced.

Twenty at a time, the Riders swept in toward the square, riding in a single line. The line curved in toward the Scadori until the lead Rider was twenty yards away. His arm snapped forward, the head of his dart gleamed in the air, and a Scadori warrior gasped as the dart drove through his shield and pinned it to his shield arm. Before the man's scream died away the Rider was swinging away, moving out of spear range as another Karani rode in, dart swinging, seeking a target of his own.

The Riders of Death could have cut down the Scadori with arrows from a distance without any danger to themselves. They might have ridden down the Scadori with their lances with only light losses. What they were actually doing was much more dangerous. Blade saw Riders go down, men or horses pierced by Scadori spears. It was also slow. But then the Karani commander had all the time in the world. If he didn't care about his men, or cared more about putting on a good show...

The Scadori lines were growing thin, and the center of the square was filling up with men who writhed and groaned or simply lay quiet, staring up at the sky. Blade saw Jarud go down with a dart in his thigh and another in his stomach, his heavy shield pincushioned with five more darts. Blade stepped forward, picked up the shield, and took Jarud's place in the outer line.

Blade's spear took one Rider's horse in the chest. The horse went to its knees and the Rider sailed over its head and crashed to the ground. Before he could rise Blade jerked a dart from his shield and flung it with deadly accuracy. It drove into the man's skull just below the ear, and he promptly stopped moving.

Then a woman's shrill scream cut through the pounding hooves and Karani and Scadori war cries. Blade's head jerked in the direction of the sound, and his breath stuck in his throat. A man in spectacularly gilded armor was riding up to the Karani line. Over his saddle he was carrying a woman. She was completely naked, and her dark hair tossed as she struggled wildly against the hand pressed brutally down on the small of her back.

Tera.

Blade's breath went out of him in a long, slow hiss. Suddenly he had a purpose that was more than standing here among the Scadori until his luck ran out. As the next Rider came trotting in, Blade pulled another dart out of the shield and waited. The Rider's arm was just going up for his throw when Blade flung his own dart squarely into the man's face. He threw up his hands and tottered backward. Out of control, his horse swept onward toward the Scadori.

Blade met the horse as it crashed through the Scadori line. He dropped his shield, clutched the bridle with one hand, and struck at the toppling Rider with his sword. The man's head flew from his shoulders and the impact of the blow swept him out of the saddle and over the rump of his horse. Before the headless corpse hit the ground, Blade was swinging himself up into the empty saddle. He was firmly seated before the horse could realize what was going on and make up its mind to resist.

Blade had the horse back through the Scadori line and moving out at a trot before any of the other Riders could react. The first one he met seemed frozen by surprise as Blade rode at him. Blade's lance swung down into striking position and smashed the Rider out of his saddle. The Rider behind him pulled

up so abruptly that his horse lost its footing on the rocky ground and spilled him, directly into Blade's path. The man gave one horrible scream as the hooves crushed in his chest, then he was left behind, kicking and groaning for breath. Blade dug his heels into the horse's flanks, urging it forward still faster.

He would have been a fine archery target if anyone had bothered to shoot at him. But half the Riders were too surprised and the other half were too afraid of hitting their comrades. Blade pounded across the open ground, crouching low in the saddle, urging the horse on with shouts and kicks. There was only one thing in his mind now—the man with the gilded armor and Tera sprawled across his saddle.

A moment later the man realized that he was Blade's target. He dug his spurs into his horse and turned away as a dozen of his men rode forward on either side, forming a solid line facing Blade. But by this time Blade had his horse moving at a canter. He hit the line before it was fully formed. His Scadori broadsword swept in a murderous arc that sliced through one Rider's raised forearm, helmet, and skull. It stuck in the skull and jerked out of Blade's hand as the dead Rider toppled. Blade urged his horse on and drew the long Karani sword out of its saddle-mounted scabbard.

Now the man in the gilded armor apparently realized that Tera was a handicap. His free arm heaved, sending her flying headfirst out of the saddle. She struck the hard ground with a scream, sprawling face down. She was just rising to her hands and knees as Blade rode up. For a moment he was tempted to snatch her up and try to ride clear with her. She stared wide-eyed at him, mouth dripping blood from a cut lip and bruises already showing dark on her arms, breasts, and thighs.

In the next moment trumpets sounded again, and behind him Blade heard the thunder of fast-moving horses, hundreds of them. He turned and saw what seemed like a thousand more Riders pouring up the slope, brandishing lances and swords and bellowing war-cries. At their head was another man in gilded armor. But this one looked seven feet tall at least, rode a horse that seemed the size of a small elephant, and brandished a club that looked like a young tree. Before Blade could reach down for Tera or get his horse moving again, the giant was on him.

Blade's sword flashed up. The club came down on it, and the steel snapped as though it had been made of bamboo. The club rose again in a feint at Blade's head, then swept in an arc that ended in the center of Blade's chest.

Suddenly he had no more breath, and no more strength to hold on to the saddle or his sword. He knew he was toppling sideways out of the saddle, knew that the giant was charging on past with roars of laughter, knew that the ground came up and hit him hard. Then he stopped knowing anything.

Chapter 8

Blade awoke bit by bit. His head hurt as though an anvil had fallen on it, and most of the rest of his body hurt almost as much. He quickly discovered that both his wrists and his ankles were tied. For the moment he was alive and reasonably healthy. Somebody had put enough value on him to take him prisoner rather than kill him outright.

It looked as though he was going to wind up among the Karani, whether he wanted to or not and whether Tera came with him or not. His jaw tightened as he thought of Tera tumbling painfully to the ground as the first man in gilded armor rode off in a panic. That man had given him a score to settle. Settle it he would if he had the slightest chance, even if he could only avenge Tera instead of rescue her.

Blade writhed and twisted himself into a sitting position. He was sitting on the edge of the forest from which the Riders had come. A long row of Scadori prisoners stretched away on either side of him. Most

of them were still unconscious or too frightened to move. Blade saw no one he recognized, and no sign of Tera.

Farther out on the mountainside Blade saw a ragged square of bodies. Black-winged scavenger birds were already circling above as the Karani stripped the bodies. The rear guard's battle had ended as it had to. Toward the pass Blade saw no sign of anything or anyone moving.

Several Riders were ambling back and forth in front of the Scadori prisoners, lances resting casually on their shoulders, drinking from wine jugs as they walked. As Blade watched, they suddenly stiffened, hooked their jugs onto their belts, and swung their lances upright.

The man who had captured Tera and the gold-armored giant were approaching each other along the line of prisoners, from opposite directions. Each moved in the middle of a circle of armed Riders, tanned, scarred, cold-eyed men who looked formidably tough.

The first man still wore his gold armor and would have looked fairly impressive in any other company. He was as tanned and tough-looking as his men, and moved like a hunting animal. But he could not quite match the impression made by the giant.

The man was not quite seven feet tall---only about six and a half, Blade realized, but broad in proportion. He now wore a blue tunic and embroidered black trousers, the tunic opening at the chest to reveal a good deal of fat and even more muscle. The man was entirely bald, but the lack of lines on his heavy-jawed face suggested someone no more than forty. The club no longer swung in his hand, but was slung across his back.

"Ho, Pardes," the smaller man shouted. "What have you to say to me?"

The larger man smiled, but it was a smile that reminded Blade of a shark opening its mouth to bite. The man had a full set of white teeth, and showed them all.

"Iscaros, I have a great many things to say to you, and I hope that His Sacred Majesty will have a great many more. Your orders were to lead your Riders to the pass and hold it with dismounted archery. You were not to put on a pretty show against a handful of those vermin. We could have trapped them all, but because of you we had barely a quarter of them, and that includes what we killed in the night's battle. Iscaros, you are a fool, and if she herself-" The man broke off, as though he had caught himself going on too far and too frankly. From his highpitched voice, Blade suspected the man was a eunuch.

The man called Iscaros laughed, but it was a laugh no more friendly than Pardes' smile. "She herself will do nothing, you prickless wonder. For I can do something, and go on doing it, that you never have. Besides, why should I lead my men to where they will do all the fighting and dying and then let yours come in and snatch up all the prisoners? Consider the woman I got by riding on in.

"Oh, I will consider her," replied the big eunuch. "I will consider how you dropped her and no doubt dropped something in your trousers when that woman's master rode at you. I will consider how little use you will get of her, after the one you pant and whimper around hears of her. Oh yes, I will consider much."

Iscaros' superficial calm cracked. "You fat no-prick, when the time comes-"

"If it comes," said Pardes in a voice suddenly ice-cold. "And it is true that I have been a eunuch for many years. But I cannot say I have done badly. Having no balls, there is no place my brains can flow down

into, the way yours have done."

For a moment it looked as though Iscaros was not only going to explode into rage but into violence. Bows swung off shoulders and swords rasped out of scabbards as both sets of bodyguards got ready for a fight. Pardes unslung his club and rested it lightly on one shoulder, ready to swing.

Then Iscaros appeared to lose his nerve. His shoulders slumped, and a barked order sent his men's weapons out of sight. "Pardes, you wield a mighty tongue, and so shall it be always. Let us put off this squabbling like children to another time, and divide up the prisoners. I claim the woman."

So Tera was alive! Blade's cracked lips curved in a smile. He was sure she would do badly in Iscaros' hands. But while she lived, she might be rescued, not just avenged.

Pardes nodded. "On your head be it, as it shall be when Princess Amadora hears of your new captive. I shall claim the man whose woman she was. From the way he rode out and struck down Riders, I would call him neither Scador nor Nessir nor Karan. He seems something new that I want to know more about."

Iscaros looked dubious. His mouth opened and shut several times before he finally nodded. "Very well. Have him and get what you can out of him, for as long as you can." Another harsh laugh. "Do not let yourself hope that will be long."

Pardes didn't seem to consider that a reply was even necessary. Instead he jerked a thumb in Blade's direction and four of his bodyguards started toward the Englishman. They reached him, cut the rope on his ankles with their swords, and dragged him to his feet. By then Pardes had joined them.

Seen close up he again looked seven feet tall. In fact he looked big enough to almost make Blade feel small and weak. But the man was certainly no mere mass of bone and muscle. He seemed to be a key player in some deadly game of intrigue going on in Karan.

"Well, warrior of whatever people you call yours," said Pardes. "Welcome to Karan." Again the teeth-baring smile.

Blade could not keep his face quite straight at the phrases. Pardes had no eyebrows to raise, but he would have raised them if he'd had them. His lips pursed, and he raised one slab-like hand to pull at his jowls. "Well, well. So it seems that you understand the speech of Karan. That does make you something new-unless you are perhaps an escaped slave. But that does not matter. What does matter is that you are now mine. By the laws of Karan I am free to wield you as I do this." He swung the club off his shoulder and swished it through the air, letting it pass within inches of Blade's face.

"You do not flinch? Good. This will be interesting, when the time comes for you to appear in the Arena." He turned to the guards. "Take him to my compound and see that he is fed." He strode away, swinging the club like a willow twig.

Blade realized that he had been holding his breath. He let it out in a long whooosh as the four guards started pushing and hauling him away. Not only was the land filled with deadly games, it now seemed that one of the chief players had chosen him for a piece in the games. Would he be just a pawn, or could he hope to rise higher? If he lived long enough, Blade knew he could and would rise. But living long enough in Dimension X was sometimes a problem.

The next morning the Karani army marched down from the mountains with its string of enslaved Scadori

prisoners and its own dead and wounded. The bodies of the Scadori dead were left lying where they fell, prey to the sun and the wind and the scavenger birds. No doubt both Pardes and Iscaros thought that the rotting bodies and later the bleached skeletons would serve as a deadly warning to the Scadori the next time they came storming over the pass. Blade was not so sure of that.

At least Degar and Chudo were probably alive. The main body of the Scadori, servants, women, and all, had reached the shelter of the rough ground where the Riders of Death could not charge or even get within archery range. If Iscaros had obeyed his orders, he might have reached the pass before the Scadori archers could settle into position. But he had sought out glory for himself and his men instead. So more than two thousand warriors of Scador marched away safely through the pass before the infantry of Karan could come up to the attack.

Blade learned other things about the battle from overheard conversations among the soldiers. The Karani had been warned of the Scadori attack by several of the mountain tribes, bribed or threatened out of their traditional alliance with the Scadori. Blade suspected the tribes had signed their own death warrants by that change.

As for the sudden night attack of the Karani infantry, that was Pardes' idea. He had contrived to mount them on commandeered farm horses from many miles around, and sent them pounding through the darkness until they could dismount in the forest and move to the attack on foot. That explained why there had not been a Karani in sight in the afternoon, and a thousand or more attacking the camp in the night.

There were seventy-odd Scadori prisoners in the line that marched off, roped together at neck and ankle, Blade marching with the others. Pardes might have his eye on Blade, but the eunuch obviously had too much sense to single him out for any further special treatment. Blade tramped along with the others, naked, barefoot, unwashed, his cuts and bruises untended, his throat baked dry. In spite of the meal served him in Pardes' compound, his stomach was beginning to growl like a caged lion.

But he started out strong, tough, unwounded, and not despairing of his future in Karan. Most of the other prisoners were in much worse shape, and their defeat and capture had knocked out of them most of the will to live. As their captors drove them along like cattle, the Scadori began to sag and stumble. Each time one went down, the Karani infantry guarding them would close in, cut the man out of the file, and lay his belly open with a sword. It was always a slash across the belly, so that the man lay on the ground shrieking in agony until his strength failed. Sometimes that took a long time, so that the prisoners marched miles farther on before the dying man's cries faded away behind them.

After this happened a dozen times, something new was feeding Blade's determination to live. It was a desire to live long enough to kill a few more Karani. When and where didn't matter. He would quite gladly pick them up by their collars and bash their heads together, or strangle them very slowly with his bare hands, if he couldn't find a weapon. But he was quite certain that at least one Karani was going to pay for every Scadori prisoner left writhing and shrieking on the ground.

After a few days there were no more executions. Everyone still on his feet was determined to stay there until he dropped dead. Some of them did just exactly that. Thirty miles a day on a few swallows of water and half a loaf of coarse bread was too much for even the hardened Scadori.

It was not beyond Blade's strength. There were times when he wasn't sure about that, but somehow he was always able to go on putting one foot in front of another. Sometimes exhaustion, sun, dust, and the sweat pouring into his eyes blinded him so that he stumbled and staggered along. Before too many more days his back was burned raw by the sun and his feet left traces of blood as he walked. But he kept on going.

One night a Karani soldier slipped in through the guards and offered him a full skin of water and large slabs of bread and meat. Blade recognized the man as one of Pardes' personal bodyguard, poured the water on the ground, and threw the bread and meat in the man's face. He would make this march on his own, with the strength that he had in him, without accepting favors from any damned Karani. He would do that or die.

As the prisoners started off the next morning, Pardes himself rode in close to the line, staring hard at Blade. Behind rode his usual companion, a hard-faced officer whose right cheek was a mass of scars above his brown beard.

Blade returned the stare, although it cost him more strength than he could really spare to keep his head up until the eunuch rode off. By now it was all he could do to keep his body upright and moving forward.

That was more than a good many of the other prisoners could do. By the time they reached a large river, only about thirty were still on their feet. None died after that, however. They were allowed to drink all the water they wanted, bathe, cut each other's hair and beards, pick out each other's lice, and generally make themselves look and feel human again. Although the food did not improve, Blade felt his strength returning rapidly. He had lost nearly thirty pounds, but what was left was all muscle and bone and sinew. The soles of his feet were as tough as shoe leather, and he was alert and aware again. The Karani guards were careful to stay at a safe distance from him, and both Pardes and his henchman were unmistakably impressed.

After a few days spent recovering, the surviving prisoners were loaded aboard a large flat-bottomed river galley and began a journey downriver. The days passed, the river widened slowly, and its banks became less covered with forests and more studded with farms, plantations, and towns. The towns grew larger and closer together, and the traffic of barges, galleys, and fishing boats on the river grew thicker. Twice they passed ferries crossing and recrossing the river, propelled by paddle wheels driven by horses on a treadmill. Blade noted all this with interest. Karan had a civilization, no doubt about it. But the smell of decadence and weakness rose from that civilization, even from the small sample Blade had seen so far.

Then at last they came to salt marshes and a tidal estuary so wide that Blade could barely see from one shore to another. Two seagoing galleys came out to join the river ship, and the three rowed on together through the night.

At dawn the next morning Blade at last saw the towers of Karanopolis rising out of the mists ahead. He saw the miles of walls with their hundred-foot towers crowned with banners, he saw the harbor crammed with galleys and sailing ships and fishing craft. He saw the three- and four-storied buildings that jostled each other for space on the five hills inside the walls. He saw the gilded and blued domes of the temples, the square towers of the palaces, and everything else that made Karanopolis the wonder of its world.

The sight of the mighty city did not discourage him. But it gave him a far more vivid notion of how large the prizes might be in the game Pardes and Iscaros were playing. Power over this city and the empire it ruled would be an immense, glittering prize. Men who sought that prize would gladly risk their lives and fortunes. They would even more gladly expend any number of minor pieces—such as unknown Scadori prisoners.

Chapter 9

For his first weeks in Karanopolis, Blade lived well. In the House of the Servants of the Arena on the outskirts of the city, he and the other prisoners destined to become gladiators lived like princes—or, more

accurately, like cattle being fattened for the slaughter. They had good and abundant food, a bottle of the finest wine each day, daily baths, exercises, massages with perfumed oils by trained slave girls, and once a week a night with one of those slave girls.

Blade found it hard to enjoy himself with the girls. They were scrubbed clean, perfumed, and wore gilded bells and bracelets and the finest of silks. But the expression in their eyes was the same as that of the slave women in Scador.

Otherwise the month Blade spent in the House was almost idyllic. He felt the flesh returning to his bones until he was up to his fighting weight again. His massive muscles regained all their strength, his reflexes regained their lightning speed, he became once more an almost frighteningly skilled fighting machine. He did frighten some of the guards. They took to giving him his orders from twenty feet away, with one hand clamped hard on the hilts of their swords. That made Blade laugh out loud, and that laughter in turn made him even more formidable in their eyes. But the men chosen for the service of the High Arena were expected to have their pride, so there was no punishment. A warrior, even a slave warrior, could not be broken into a cringing creature like one of the slave girls.

But there would be no such protection for Tera. She was in the hands of a man who might take personal pleasure in literally beating her into submission. The thought of that happening to Tera was never entirely out of Blade's mind. Even when he was impressing guards by snatching thrown spears out of the air or fending off two swordsmen at once with only a small round shield and a stick, he could not forget Tera.

He knew very well where all this luxurious living and training would take him in the end. From the sunbathing deck on the roof of the House he could look across the fruit orchards and country villas to the looming mass of the High Arena. Inside that hill-sized pile of black and white checkered stone he would sooner or later fight and probably sooner or later die, for the amusement of as many as two hundred thousand people.

What he didn't know was how being a piece in Pardes' game would affect his path from the House to the Arena. He was sure it would. The eunuch wouldn't let even the smallest of his pieces go astray until it had done its job. But it would be a waste of time to try finding answers when he didn't even know half the questions.

Blade left the House of the Servants of the Arena after six weeks. As fighters were trained and fattened up, they were bought by wealthy individuals or syndicates. Some of these bought gladiators simply for the pleasure of seeing them go out and fight and die. Others bought them and sent them out because putting a good team of gladiators into the Arena amused the people of Karanopolis.

That way could lie power-power over the swarming mob of the great city. In their hundreds of thousands the mob could swamp any army, sweep away any enemy, topple noblemen, princes, and even Emperors. It had happened before. To be able to make it happen again, at their command, was the dream of every ambitious man high enough in Karan to have any dreams at all. If they could not do that, they could at least try for the more modest goal of keeping their enemies from hurling the mob against them.

Blade didn't exactly get all this laid out for him on a gilded scroll. But he kept his eyes and ears open and his mouth shut, and built up the picture out of the odd piece dropped here and there by guards or loose-tongued visitors. After six weeks in the House, he had few doubts left about what kind of game Pardes was playing.

Blade was not bought out of the House by Pardes himself. That would have been unsubtle and foolish.

The huge eunuch would never be foolish—at least not more than once. He probably would never be unsubtle, either, even when he could afford it. Among the rulers of Karan, intrigue was not just a technique. It was an addiction.

The man who came to buy Blade was named Figurades, a wealthy merchant nearly as big as the eunuch. But most of his bulk was fat, and the fat was swathed in embroidered silks and soft kidskin, not in wool and leather and metal. His sausage-thick fingers practically dripped rings, and his heavy-fowled face did drip sweat.

Blade doubted if all that sweat was caused by the heat. It was the height of summer and the sun poured down into the Auction Yard behind the House. But beside the merchant stood Pardes' henchman, the scar-faced soldier. He wore a long knife in his jeweled belt and his small eyes moved from Blade to the merchant and back again. He watched Figurades particularly closely as the man counted out one thousand two hundred stamped gold coins as Blade's purchase price.

Left to himself a merchant like Figurades would never have paid half that sum for even the most formidable gladiator-slave. But he wasn't being left to himself. Blade suspected that half of those coins came from Pardes' own purse. The eunuch had moved his new piece one square forward.

No doubt the next move would be to the High Arena itself, for Blade's first combat.

Chapter 10

Blade's first fight in the Arena came two weeks after Figurades bought him. It was not much of a test. Against Blade none of the three opponents lasted more than ten minutes. Two of them had no more chance than a twelve-year-old boy. The third was either more skilled or more desperate, but even he lasted ten minutes only because Blade realized that he shouldn't kill too quickly. The crowd in the seats of the Arena had the same fondness for seeing slow, painful deaths as the Karani soldiers did. Blade couldn't bring himself to slice the man apart piece by piece, but he did manage to play with him long enough to have the crowd howling in bloodthirsty delight. Then the man launched a wild charge at Blade. A moment later he was flat on the sand at Blade's feet, blood pouring from his mouth and from the spear wound in his chest.

Blade learned a good deal from that first fight. He learned even more from watching the rest of the day's fighting. By nightfall, it was obvious that only fights involving the less skilled gladiators were usually pushed to the end. The magnates of the Empire of Karan were more than happy to gratify the mob's lust for blood. But as a rule, they were unwilling to dip too deeply into their pockets to do so. A first-class gladiator ran from four hundred gold pieces on up. But the poor wretches who died by the half-dozen cost their masters no more than fifty or a hundred apiece.

Yet there was a catch in that pattern, a catch that Blade kept in mind on the way back to Figurades' slave quarters that night. What happened when really good fighters faced each other, each owned by a master with a well-filled purse? Even against a half-trained fighter, bad luck or an accident could still kill an expert. Against an equal, the risk was even greater.

Then suppose betting was heavy, so that one side might gain a tempting prize by a kill? Or suppose someone wanted to put on a particularly spectacular show of skill with weapons? Blade wondered how long it would be before he got caught in a situation like that.

He saw experts pitted against each other the very next week, in fact. Iscaros sent seven of his most formidable gladiators into the Arena. Five of them walked out of it, leaving behind two dead comrades

and no less than seventeen dead opponents and a wildly cheering crowd.

That day Iscaros was accompanied by a woman who made Blade start the first time he saw her. For a moment he thought he was looking at Tera, flaunted on the arm of her master. Then he looked more closely and saw that this woman, though much like Tera, was a good head taller and stood and gestured like one born to command. The simple robe that flowed down from her slim shoulders glittered with a wealth of tiny jewels that not even the arrogant Iscaros would have lavished on a slave woman.

"Who is that woman with Iscaros?" Blade asked the one-armed ex-gladiator in charge of Figurades' team.

The man grunted and spat openly over the railing into the sand below. "That-that-" He apparently couldn't think of a word bad enough. "That woman with Count Iscaros, she's Princess Amadora. 'The Gift of Ama,' the Love Goddess, her name is. Certainly fits her, too. Can't live a day without a man's tool in her, they say. Count Iscaros must have more than meets the eye, for her to keep him around this long."

Blade looked at the princess again. No, she did not look that much like Tera. This woman had no more life in her face than in the diadem perched on top of her high-piled hair. Then Blade remembered that in Karan the diadem was a sign of royal blood.

"Iscaros aims high, even so. Can't the Emperor stand between him and Amadora?"

The other man granted and looked at Blade as though he had just asked why water ran downhill. "Not a chance. She's the Emperor's own first cousin, and ten good years older. She did a fair bit to raise him up after his father died. Now, though, I think likely she's aiming to raise him higher still."

Blade knew by now the ceremonial method of slow execution in Karan. "On a wall hook, with a gilded cord around his throat?"

The man looked at Blade warningly and cleared his throat. But he also nodded. Blade decided not to ask if Amadora was aiming for the Coral Throne herself. That question was neither wise nor at all necessary.

Was Iscaros aiming just as high? Certainly he would have a chance to do so, as long as Princess Amadora kept him around. That made the game he was playing against Pardes even bigger than Blade had suspected.

Blade did not much care who ruled in Karan. But he did care about being so trapped in games played by its mighty men and women that he could not lift a finger to help or even find Tera. It was maddening to realize that he might never even know if she was dragging out her life in some third-class brothel, or lay dead in a secret grave, tortured to death by Iscaros for an evening's amusement.

Blade decided that if he had a chance to kill one high-placed Karani and one only, it would be Iscaros.

The summer wore on, the fights in the Arena now coming two and three times a week. The competition among Karan's rulers to put on the best and bloodiest show for the screaming mob grew more and more intense. Before too long, all of the competitors except for Pardes, Iscaros, and two or three others with either great ambitions or great wealth or both dropped out, unable to stand the pace.

The showpiece of Iscaros' team was a trio of men only a little smaller than Blade. They always fought as a trio, one with broadsword and shield, one with a two-handed axe, and one with trident and net. Each

of them was formidable alone. As a team they swept all before them until no one could be found to bet against them and only the cheapest and most expendable fighters were sent against them. Finally they disappeared from the Arena, after gladiators picked to fight them started killing themselves rather than appear in the Arena against the Three of Iscaros.

Blade, meanwhile, built up a modest reputation of his own as a spectacular executioner of unskilled and semiskilled fighters. Only twice did he meet men who were anything like a fair match for him. Building a reputation by satisfying the crowd's barbarous thirst for blood disgusted Blade. He was also quite sure that his lack of equal opponents was no accident. Somewhere in the background, Pardes' massive hand was at work, playing his piece as he thought best.

The summer was more than half over when one evening before the games the one-armed trainer called Blade to his office. As Blade entered, he saw a large wicker basket sitting on the table, a bronze tube tied to the handle with a gold cord. The trainer nodded to Blade, who broke open the tube and read the letter inside.

It had no salutation, no signature, and no manners. It said only:

In tomorrow's fighting you shall be matched alone against the Three of Iscaros in a Game of Rescue. Your victory shall earn much. (For whom? Blade wondered.) His Sacred Majesty shall be present, wishing to appear before his people as he prepares his march into Scador. It is wished that you eat no food and drink no wine except from this basket.

Blade had heard rumors of an invasion of Scador, but this was the first definite word. In any case, there was a more important question.

"What is a Game of Rescue?" asked Blade.

The trainer smiled. "One of the great shows of the High Arena, Blade. You will be remembered for being part of one, whether you win or lose. I can think-

"Think after answering my question, please," said Blade.

The trainer made a mock bow. "As Your Exaltedness wishes. In the Game of Rescue one or more beautiful women are tied naked to a stake in the center of the Arena. One side tries to rescue them, the other to keep them from being rescued. At the end of the fight, the victors rape the women."

Blade could not keep the disgust out of his voice. "There, in front of half of Karanopolis?"

The trainer shrugged. "Why not?"

At that moment, if someone had presented Blade with a switch that would have destroyed the whole Empire of Karan and everyone in it, Blade would have pulled it without thinking twice. His fist came up by sheer reflex. Only after a long moment was he sure that he was not going to spatter the trainer's brains all over the opposite wall.

After that moment, control returned. He looked down at the basket, then at the trainer. "I think I shall eat nothing and drink nothing except water from the common tap until the fight is over," he said. "Send this basket to the slave girls, or feed it to the pigs, or do as you wish with it. I shall not eat any of it."

The trainer's mouth was still gaping open when Blade turned on his heel and strode out of the office.

Once he was back in his own room and felt completely calm, he considered whether he had gambled too much on a gesture. He decided he hadn't. Twelve or even twenty-four hours' fasting would not slow him down or weaken him enough to decrease his chances even against the Three.

Was the basket from Iscaros or from Pardes? Was the food and wine poisoned or not? It didn't matter now. What did matter was that both Pardes and Iscaros would undoubtedly hear of Blade's gesture, hopefully before they came to the Arena tomorrow. They would both be wondering what was going on in Blade's mind, both be wondering if this little piece would suddenly start moving along its own path!

The idea of making two of Karan's mighty game-players even slightly confused and uncertain was very pleasant for Blade. It was so pleasant that he found it easy to get a good night's sleep, untroubled by his rumbling stomach or any thoughts at all of tomorrow's fight.

Chapter 11

The next morning the trainer locked Blade and the slave attendants into the covered cart and drove them down to the Arena. As they drove past the public gates, Blade saw through the barred windows that the crowds were already gathering. The lines at the betting booths seemed to stretch halfway around the whole Arena. The trainer shouted a question down from his seat, and several voices answered with words Blade couldn't make out.

When the cart drew up in the smelly darkness of the Arena's underground slave section, Blade asked, "What's causing all the uproar with the betting?"

The trainer shook his head. "There's plenty of money going down on you against Iscaros' three. I'm hardly sure why myself, although you'll surely make a better showing against them than anyone else has. Perhaps it's the odds."

"What are they?"

"Fifty to one against you."

Blade whistled. Somebody was hoisting up those odds, somehow. He had never heard of odds in any Arena fight going so high. Somebody stood to gain a good deal from today's fight if Blade won. He doubted if it was the average bettor with his two or three silver pieces. He also suspected that most of the money being bet on him was not coming from the bettors' own pockets. He had no sort of record to attract any real betting money when he was facing the Three.

Blade looked at the trainer, but the man refused to meet his eye. Doubtless the trainer knew more than he was telling, but would rather die under torture than tell any of it—since he certainly would die under torture if he did tell.

Blade relaxed on one of the couches while the attendants massaged and oiled him and prepared his weapons and armor. He was going to use two swords against the Three, a broadsword and a short sword, with only light armor. He was going to rely on his speed and the advantage of one man facing three even when the three fought as a team.

As he lay there, considering possible moves and countermoves, he heard the trainer's voice say, "Good morning, Noble Lord."

"Good morning, my man." It was the voice of Pardes' scarred henchman. "I would speak to Blade." Blade turned as he heard footsteps approaching his couch and managed to look appropriately humble and respectful.

"You look less than your best," the man said, pulling at his small curled beard. "I would be sad to think that you will meet your end today merely through a passing illness." The dark eyes never left Blade's face.

Blade bowed his head. "It is the custom of my people to fast the day before a mighty battle. Surely this will be such, Lord?"

"It certainly will be," said the man. "If you win today you will be the most famous gladiator in all of Karan, and your fame will live after you." The man's lips formed a smile, but his eyes did not join in. They held a "Do-you-expect-me-to-believe-your-story?" expression.

Blade itched to stare this man down. But noblemen of Karan were apt to regard a slave's meeting their eyes as insubordination or rebellion. He would be taking an unnecessary risk.

After a moment the man turned away and strode out. "Who was that?" Blade asked the trainer. It was time to be able to put a name to that man.

"That is the noble Baron Descares," the trainer said. "He is an officer in the Guardians of the Coral Throne and related by marriage to the Second Master of War, Duke Pardes."

The Guardians of the Coral Throne were the elite troops of Karan, the deadly cavalry the Scadori called the Riders of Death. Descares was even more of a Somebody than Blade had imagined. But no doubt Pardes would see to it that those who served him well would rise as high as their birth and talents permitted, or even higher.

Blade was the only fighter from Figurades' household in the Arena today. But he was not the first on the lists. The Council that ruled the High Arena had obviously decided to give the crowd a chance to fill every seat and work up a nice appetite for blood before bringing on the day's main event. The howls and roars of the crowd above told Blade that the appetite was growing on schedule. In the rare moments of near-silence, the continuous mutter of voices and shuffle of feet told him that people were still arriving.

"This will be the biggest crowd in the three hundred years men have fought in the Arena," said the trainer. "You will go forth to meet the Three and your fate before the eyes of His Sacred Majesty and far more than two hundred thousand of his subjects."

"You seem quite sure that I am going to my death, old man," said Blade, slapping the trainer on the shoulder with the familiarity permitted a gladiator on a day of fighting.

The trainer shrugged. "You have seen the Three fight, and their opponents die."

"Yes," said Blade. "I have seen the Three fight. That is why today the people and His Majesty will see me fight, and see the Three die."

The trainer shrugged again, with a "Believe-it-if-it-makes-you-comfortable" expression on his face. Before he could say anything, the trumpets sounded, the massed trumpets that signalled the day's main event. Blade knew that was his call. He hooked on his belt with the two swords, tightened the straps of his broad-rimmed helmet and jointed armor, and accepted a brief blessing from the trainer. Then he turned and strode up the ramp that led to the sands of the Arena.

The sky had clouded over since morning. Blade knew this would be an advantage for him if it lasted. One trick the Three used was to maneuver so that their opponents had to keep facing the sun. That trick would be useless now.

A deafening roar went up from the crowd as Blade strode out on the sand, moving steadily toward the center of the Arena. It was not cheering for him in particular. It was the cheering he had heard so many times before, the howl of the mob delighted at the chance for a grand bloody spectacle. And this one would have an even more exciting climax than usual, as the victor or victors had a girl there, on the sand, right in front of everybody!

When Blade waved to the crowd, he had to force himself not to shake his fists in rage.

He stopped in the middle of the white circle that marked his assigned place. Twenty yards away was the stake to which the girl would be bound, and beyond it the red circle where the Three would stand.

Another cheer rose as the Three emerged from the Arena's underground chambers and marched toward their circle, keeping perfect step as they always did. The trident man was adding an extra flourish today, tossing his trident up in the air and catching it as it came down. That gesture smelled of the kind of overconfidence Blade was always happy to see in an opponent.

The Three reached their circle and swung into a line facing Blade. The cheering died away as the people in the stands made themselves as comfortable as possible, with rented cushions and candied nuts and wine.

Blade crossed his arms on his chest and scanned the stands. The notables of Karan had turned out as enthusiastically for today's fight as the mob. The sections reserved for them blazed with the colors of their canopies and banners. Blade recognized both the orange and gold of Pardes and the blue and red of Iscaros. Blade was grimly satisfied to know that both players were here to watch their pieces in action.

In the center of the notables was a mass of purple and silver that Blade had not seen before. Even in the pale light he saw the sheen of the armor of infantry surrounding that section, and of dismounted Guardians drawn up on the sand in front of it. His Most Sacred Majesty, Jores VII, Emperor of Karan, the fifty-seventh to sit upon the Coral Throne, was indeed in attendance today.

The distance was too great for Blade to even make out the Emperor, let alone get a good look at him. All the tales Blade had heard suggested that Jores VII was a well-intentioned youth, barely nineteen. He was not stupid, but he was inexperienced, and unreasonably determined to make a mighty name for himself in a short time. He was not at all the man to clamp down with an iron hand on the intrigues of his nobles or compel awe and obedience from the mob. If Princess Amadora did aim at sitting upon the Coral Throne herself, Jores VII would not be the strongest opponent she faced.

Blade's political calculations were cut off by more trumpet calls. This time they seemed to be trying to play a light, lilting tune. They did not succeed very well. In any case another burst of cheering promptly drowned them out. A gate in the wall of the Arena opened, and a light two-wheeled cart rumbled out, drawn by two white horses. Two soldiers in polished silver armor stood in it, one driving and one holding a girl dressed in a nearly transparent white shift. The cart rumbled up to the stake and stopped. The soldier holding the girl grabbed her around the waist and lifted her to the sand. Blade felt his breath stop in his throat and his insides go first cold, then blazing hot.

The girl was Tera.

Even from twenty yards away Blade could see that she had been beaten, starved, and abused. She stood as though those beautiful legs could barely support her, head drooping and hair flowing down over the breasts clearly visible through the silk. She made no resistance as the soldiers tied her to the post.

By the time the soldiers had finished, Blade's first blazing rage was under control. In its place was an icy, chill determination that the Three Iscaros had sent out to kill him and rape Tera in the Arena were not going to live much longer.

No doubt Iscaros had tired of the girl, or found it unwise to keep her around. He knew that sooner or later Pardes' gladiator Blade would come up against the Three. So why not make that fight a Game of Rescue, and kill Blade, dispose of Tera, and score a move against Pardes all at once? Why not indeed, particularly when the sight of Tera would doubtless drive Blade into a mad rage and make him fatally careless?

It was not Blade who would be fatally careless today. It was Iscaros who had just been so. Blade would fight with all the skill and all the power at his command. What Iscaros had hoped would be Blade's death sentence was going to be a death sentence for the Three.

Chapter 12

Blade knew that he would still need all his skill to put a scratch on any of the Three. There would be quite a fight before all three of them were stretched out dead on the sand.

So let the fight begin, Blade said to himself. He strode forward out of his circle, toward the Three. He met Tera's eyes briefly as he passed the stake. She seemed half-numb with exhaustion and terror, but he thought a smile flickered briefly on her lips. If she said anything, it was drowned out at once by the shouts of the Three as they rushed forward.

They doubtless hoped to frighten Blade. He decided to make them think they had succeeded, and further increase their overconfidence. He backed away as they came at him, looking in mock terror from one to another. Blade was agile enough to back away almost as fast as he could move forward. The Three came on, shouting war-cries and also obscene references to what they would do to Tera.

One thing had killed most of those who fought the Three before. While an opponent was attacking one, the other two could close in on him. Then the man could either die then and there or break off that attack and die later. Blade had seen both happen.

As the Three approached, Blade suddenly swung to the right and leaped as high and as far as he could. His trained muscles sent him a good fifteen feet. He landed beside the man carrying the two-handed axe. The man started to raise the axe, then realized that he would leave himself wide open if he did: He held the six-foot handle across his body like a quarterstaff as Blade came at him.

Blade's broadsword crashed into the axe head with a shower of sparks. His short sword drove through the man's defense and tore into his right shoulder.

Now the other two men were swinging around to move in on Blade. He quickly backed away. As he did the axeman raised his weapon and let loose with a full swing. Blade leaped aside as the steel head whistled down and half buried itself in the sand. Then he closed, his short sword stabbing at the man's throat and his broadsword slashing down at one arm. He could not quite reach the man's throat without closing too much, but his broadsword bit deep into an arm. The axeman let out a howl of agony and

waved an arm that gushed blood and now ended in limp and useless fingers. Blade sprang backward at full speed as the swordsman and the trident man dashed at him. He barely escaped being impaled on the trident. His broadsword whistled in an arc that forced the swordsman to raise his shield and stay at a distance. Then Blade was backing off to a moment's safety.

All around the Arena the crowd was howling in surprise and delight at seeing bloody wounds on one of the terrible Three. It had been months since this happened. By all the gods, this Blade was going to give them a spectacle that no one here would ever forget as long as he lived!

Blade grinned wolfishly at the Three. That was why he had taken a real risk to give one of them a serious wound. It wasn't just a matter of weakening one opponent. It was getting the crowd on his side, as far as the bloodthirsty mob of Karanopolis could ever be on any side but their own. This was worth a fortune to him for what it could do to the courage of the Three when they heard the crowd clamoring for their blood. It had been months since they heard cheers for anyone but themselves.

If any of the Three had to leave the Arena, it would count against them. So the wounded axeman bound up his bleeding arm and shoulder and stayed on his feet. By bracing his axe across his wounded arm and swinging it with his good one he might even be able to fight. But he would be weakened by loss of blood, slowed by the pain, and no longer even half as dangerous as he had been. Blade now focused his attention on the man with the sword and shield.

This man was the largest of the Three. As far as they had a leader, he was it. He was also the fastest on his feet, and probably all-around the most dangerous. Blade knew he would have to mix caution with speed against this man.

He moved straight in against the swordsman. The man stood shoulder to shoulder with the trident man. The wounded axeman stood behind the others, where he would not have to face Blade's first rush.

As Blade closed, the trident man swung out with his net. The weighted mesh sailed at Blade, to entangle his head or arm, slow him, destroy his balance. Blade ducked under the net, pivoted, and did a quick exchange of swords between hands as he did so. Now his broadsword flashed in his left hand and his short sword thrust forward in his right.

Cheers rose from the crowd again at this performance. The cheers were even louder when Blade thrust with the shortsword, nicking the swordsman beside the knee. There was hardly any place where a light wound would slow a man more.

Simultaneously Blade's broadsword whistled toward the trident man. It moved so fast that he didn't have a chance to throw the net again. He didn't have a chance to do anything except jump back, stabbing wildly downward with the trident. It struck only sand, as Blade sprang clear.

Once again Blade drew back to a safe distance and listened to the howls of the crowd. He had them on his side now, for putting on such a show and wounding two of the formidable Three. Tera's face was almost glowing now with sudden hope. Certainly he had made a good start. The axeman was half-crippled, the swordsman slowed, the trident man shaken by the discovery of just how formidable Blade was.

Now it was time to make a good ending, finishing off the Three so that the crowd would be with him in everything else that he wanted to do this day. Blade had plans beyond the end of the fighting. To carry them out he needed to have the crowd absolutely in his pocket.

So it was time for the Three to not just die, but die memorably and spectacularly!

Blade launched another attack aimed at the swordsman, and watched carefully the positions the Three took up. Good. The axeman was moving up too close behind the swordsman. The wounded man wanted vengeance and wanted to show the crowd that he hadn't lost his nerve. He was getting worried about the cheers for Blade, and getting overeager.

He had certainly chosen the wrong time and place for that.

Blade came in again and feinted with his broadsword to draw the trident man out of position. Now he had to use all his speed and get his timing exactly right. As the swordsman moved forward, Blade leaped high, both feet smashing into the top of the swordsman's big shield. Blade's impact knocked the swordsman over backward. As he fell he knocked the axeman down. The man flung out his good arm to break his fall, but only succeeded in dropping his axe. He sprawled on his back on the sand, the swordsman pinning down his legs.

Before either of the fallen men could move, Blade leaped again and landed just behind the axeman's head. He whirled and his broadsword slashed down, biting into the man's neck. Blood splashed onto Blade's legs and all over the swordsman. The axeman's head rolled free on the sand, and the crowd howled and shrieked like madmen.

The trident man could have attacked then, while Blade's attention was directed downward. He might even have succeeded. But the sight of the head rolling on the bloody sand seemed to paralyze him. He stood rooted in place, his net trailing, his trident over his shoulder, and his mouth sagging open.

He continued to stand while Blade stepped over the corpse of the axeman and attacked the fallen swordsman.

He smashed the flat of his broadsword down on the wrist of the man's sword-arm. He saw the man's fingers open limply and let his sword fall. Blade reached down and jerked the man's shield aside as easily as if he had been pulling up a weed in a garden. Then he struck downward with all his strength and weight behind his short sword, driving it between the joints of the swordsman's armor. The man gasped, twisted like a worm on a hook, sprayed blood from his mouth and nose, kicked briefly, and lay still.

As Blade stood up, the thunder of the crowd swelling around him, the trident man got up the courage to attack. But he came in slowly and thrust clumsily with his trident, forgetting his net completely. Blade raised his broadsword and thrust it between the tines of the trident, then twisted hard with all his strength. The trident flew out of the man's hand. Blade dropped his short sword and snatched the trident before it could even hit the ground. The disarmed trident man froze again for a split second, then turned and ran. The crowd went mad.

The trident man did not get very far. Blade hefted the trident, tested its balance, then threw it, aiming low. It took the fleeing man in the backs of his unarmored legs. He went down with a yell, dropping the net. Blade dashed up to his victim, landed with both knees on the small of his back, and picked up the net. Carefully he looped it around the man's neck, then started pulling it tight. The man's pleas for mercy became choked whimperings, then the whimperings died and his face began to turn blue. Blade pulled the net tighter, then jerked up and back as hard as he could. The man's neck gave with a sharp crack and he went limp and lifeless.

Blade stood up slowly, dropping the net to the sand. Then he turned and walked back to where he had dropped his short sword. Every step of the way the impossible noise of the crowd pounded at his ears.

A quarter of a million people were pouring out every bit of breath in their lungs to cheer the man who had slain the terrible Three of Iscaros as if they were so many half-trained beginners. Blade had given them blood and given them memories to take home and live with for the rest of their lives. They were almost ready to worship him.

Although the cheering made his head ache, Blade ignored it. He bent down and picked up his short sword, then waved both swords over his head. The sun was coming out from behind the clouds now, and the light struck dazzling glints from the swords. People in the stands began to throw scarves, wine cups, pieces of jewelry onto the sand.

Blade sheathed his broadsword and headed toward the stake where Tera stood. The crowd roar began to die as people waited to see the climax of the Game of Rescue. Blade's dry lips curled in a savage grin. Those bastards up there were going to get a surprise in another minute, all quarter-million of them! They were just going to have to get their entertainment some other way than by seeing him with Tera.

By the time Blade reached Tera the crowd was almost quiet. Blade was reaching out with his short sword to slash the ropes binding Tera to the stake, when he got a better idea. He sheathed the sword, stepped up to the stake, and took a firm grip on it with both arms. Then slowly, steadily, teeth clamped hard together and forehead wrinkling with the strain, he pulled. Inch by inch the heavy wooden stake slipped up out of the sand, up out of the circle of Tera's arms, until suddenly it came free with a rush. Tera collapsed on the sand. Blade raised the stake high over his head, then threw it like a spear as hard as he could. It flew a hundred feet, then sank point-first into the sand and stood there quivering.

Before the cheering died away Blade stepped up to Tera and picked her up in his arms. Her trembling hands gripped his shoulders, and her eyes closed briefly. She was close to fainting with strain, exhaustion, and relief. Blade took a firm grip on her and began walking across the sand, heading toward the Emperor's canopy.

Silence settled down over the Arena again, broken by an undercurrent of confused muttering as people realized what Blade was doing-or rather, not doing. That was fine with Blade. Let them stay confused for a few minutes more, until he reached the Emperor.

It seemed more like a few hours, walking slowly across the sand with Tera a limp weight in his arms. But eventually Blade found himself standing before the Emperor's section, looking up at the massed potentates of the Empire of Karan. Pardes was there now, and as Blade watched, Iscaros came scurrying down from his own section. The count's face was pale and drawn, the big eunuch's totally expressionless. The Guardians of the Coral Throne were as immobile as so many statues in a temple to the gods of war. But Blade knew that a single word from their commanding officer would put a hundred arrows into him and Tera. He could be facing more danger now than he had against the Three, with less chance of fighting back.

Blade took a deep breath and raised his voice.

"Your Majesty!"

A startled rumble of voices came from the notables. Heads turned toward Jores VII. It was his move now. By law no free subject of the Coral Throne might address the Emperor without being spoken to first. But a slave stood outside the law. Blade could be shot down like a rabbit-or listened to with respectful attention. It was up to the Emperor. The only one of the notables not looking at the Emperor now was Pardes.

Seen close up, Jores VII did not impress Blade. He was no more than nineteen or twenty, with a thin, intense, pimply face framed by unkempt dark hair. The purple robes and glittering regalia of Karan seemed like a costume on his lanky body, and he fidgeted and twisted in his seat. This was not a man Blade would have trusted with his life or the life of anyone close to him, if there were any choice.

The Emperor jerked his head in what was no doubt supposed to be a gracious nod; and raised a hand. That also was no doubt supposed to be a gracious gesture. To Blade it looked more like someone hailing a taxi. But the notables now shifted their eyes to Blade. The Emperor was going to let him speak.

Blade's words came out smoothly. "Your Majesty. This woman, Tera, was to be my wife among the Scadori. I would ask of you permission not to take her here upon the sands before all Karanopolis. Rather, I would take her as my wife, as it would have been, for I have found her pleasing. If this cannot be, then I must ask that I be allowed to slay her, for-" (he almost said "-for she has suffered enough in Karan") "-for I would not see her shamed." Then he bowed his head as humbly as he could manage, wondering what he would do if Jores VII said, "Very well, you have my permission to slay her honorably."

Instead, the Emperor's high-pitched voice rose. "Stand, Blade."

Blade stood, not quite looking at the Emperor but aware that the man was looking intently at him.

"Blade, you have this day fought as I would not have believed it possible to fight. You are a mighty warrior. Such as you should not be exposed to death in the Arena.

"Therefore it is Our Imperial Will that you be at once set free, and enrolled in the ranks of the Guardians of the Coral Throne. You shall have of Us money to purchase all that you may need, and also Our command to make of this woman Tera your wife according to the Laws of Karan. So We have spoken, so shall it be." The Emperor sat down.

Cheering rose again from the stands of the Arena, as word of the Emperor's command ran through the crowd. Blade let out a long sigh of relief. His grand gesture had drawn the response he had hoped for. Now the crowd was cheering it wildly. He had not spoiled the popularity he'd earned by his victory over the Three. He had added to it, in fact. In the process he had saved Tera from whatever fate Iscaros might have inflicted on her in his rage over the defeat of the Three.

Finally, he had thrown down to both Iscaros and Pardes the warning that he was a piece with a mind of his own. The count was sagging into a chair, too stunned to even stand, his face working and twisting. Pardes showed no more expression than ever. But the dark eyes in the heavy face were fixed on Blade's like a hungry snake's on a bird.

Chapter 13

The eight thousand officers and men of the Guardians of the Coral Throne were the elite of the Imperial army of Karan, the spearhead and principal striking force in war. In peacetime they lived in luxury in a mile-square complex of barracks, stables, and armories to the north of Karanopolis.

The rest of the army and many of the citizens thought the Guardians were hardly worth their keep. After his first few days in the barracks, Blade began to wonder himself.

Each trooper had the right to a personal servant and a woman, slave or free. Each trooper had two riding horses and a blooded stallion for war, three sets of armor, four sets of weapons, a chamber of his

own and a common room he shared with no more than seven other troopers. His pay each month was more than the average infantryman saw in six months or the average worker of Karanopolis saw in a year.

That was just the troopers. The company officers lived like lords, the regimental commanders lived like princes of the Empire and frequently were just that. Altogether, the Guardians ate up as much money each year as the rest of the Imperial forces put together. They were not cowardly or incompetent, at least against inferior opponents. Their fight against the Scadori rearguard showed that. But it had been seventy years since they fought and won an equal battle against a civilized opponent. Perhaps they were worth their keep then. Blade doubted they were worth it now.

Blade did not mind at all the Guardians' right to a woman. With the Emperor's command behind him, he found it easy to persuade Iscaros' slavemaster to part with Tera for a nominal sum. The man would obviously have preferred to charge a great deal more. Count Iscaros had interests in a good many of the Arena betting offices. Paying off all the bets placed on Blade had reduced a good many of those offices to bankruptcy, and their gamblers to begging their bread in the unsympathetic streets of Karanopolis. With them had gone all of Iscaros' investments, enough gold to hurt even a noble of the Empire of Karan.

Blade mentally recorded another victory for Pardes. Who else but the eunuch would have had the necessary gold to finance such a huge betting campaign against the Three? Even more, who else would have had such a good reason?

It was just as well for Blade that Pardes had such a victory to celebrate. Blade's joining the Guardians wasn't what the eunuch had been expecting or wanting. Iscaros himself commanded the Eighth Regiment of the Guardians. Pardes might be wondering if the count would move to win Blade over with bribes and promises, or have him quietly eliminated some dark night.

Now Pardes hopefully would be too busy to worry about what Blade might do or what might be done to him. Blade would be able to spend his time doing what could be done for Tera before the Guardians marched out. The Guardians were allowed to take their women with them on campaign, but only if the women were fit. If Tera did not recover fast enough from her treatment at the hands of Iscaros, she would have to stay behind. In that case she probably wouldn't be alive when Blade returned.

Fortunately Blade also received a respectable sum of money from the Emperor. Blade got Tera the best doctor that Karanopolis could provide, the finest food and medicines, and delicate oils for her baths.

Also fortunately, Tera was not really in bad shape. Iscaros had starved her, kept her confined in chill, filthy chambers, beaten her frequently, and tortured her more than once. But he hadn't inflicted any serious injuries. So gradually the gauntness left her, and her normal graceful curves returned. Her bruises and cuts healed, her dark hair flowed in a sweet-smelling mass down her back, and the hunted, frightened look left her eyes. Thanks to Blade, she was living in comfort and even luxury that she had never dreamed of in Scador and never met in Karan. She was warm, clean, well-fed, living with a man who obviously cared for her and would go on treating her well and keeping her safe.

Blade knew that he certainly did care for Tera. She was something warm, alive, honest, someone he could talk to without watching every word. She stood apart from everyone else he'd met in this Dimension, both Scadori and Karani. She was neither a rough warrior of Scador, nor a repulsively civilized intriguer and game-player of the Empire of Karan. She was just-Tera. That was all she would be, all she wanted to be to him.

He wished he could be sure of keeping her safe against all the people who might choose to strike at him

through her. It was a hopeless cause, he knew. But at least he could take her with him when the Guardians marched off to war. It did not seem to bother her that they were going to a war against her own people.

"What am I to do if I do not go where you go?" she said. "By all that I know to be proper and lawful, I must follow you. You march against Scador, with the Guardians. This is true. But you do not do it because you hate me, or wish me harm. The Karani have become your people, for reasons that you must know-"

"Because I am a man?"

Tera smiled. "There are many men of Scador I would not follow, because they are not wise and I would not be sure why they did what they did and went where they went. But you are not like any of them. You are a wise man as well as a great warrior."

Blade sighed. "Suppose I killed Degar, your father? What would you say and do then?"

"I would mourn him as the customs of Scador say a daughter should mourn her father. But I would not hate you for it unless you came to hate me. We are all still in the hands of the Watchers. They bring death to each of us when it is time, by the means they choose. I would not go against them. Even more, I would not go against you, for you are-what you are-to me." She could not quite keep her voice steady or her eyes dry as she said those last words.

Blade mentally cursed himself. She loved him with this terrible faith. But he couldn't even be sure of keeping her alive. Damn all the Karani and damn everything they did or might do!

It was fortunate that Tera recovered quickly. Jores VII was boyishly eager to be off to the great war against the Scadori.

"Ah well," said Zogades, an old sergeant in Blade's troop of the Fourth Regiment, "What can one expect of the lad? It's his first war, and everyone gets a bee up his arse when it's their first war." Reverence for His Sacred Majesty did not mark the real old soldiers in the Guardians. But nine-tenths of the officers were well-born fops, and nine-tenths of the men were overfed, overmuscled bullies. They could fight quite well, at least as long as they didn't run into any surprises, but not a moment longer. None of them knew enough about war to doubt the Emperor's wisdom.

All the Guardians were going, except those sick or still in training, and so were ten thousand of the best infantry. There would be nearly twenty thousand fighting men, a respectable fighting force in any Dimension. Going along with them would be an even larger number of women, servants, teamsters, baggage boys, and other camp followers.

The busiest man in Karanopolis was apparently Pardes, the Second Master of War. He was around the Guardians' barracks at least once a day, always firing off orders and asking questions, most of them intelligent. Apparently the nominal First Master of War was not only incompetent but half-senile, so Pardes was doing two men's work.

Pardes probably didn't mind doing all the work as long as he got all the credit as well. The huge eunuch was not going with the army, and rumor had it that he was none too happy about this. Why should he be, when his archrival Iscaros was riding off at the head of his Regiment of the Guardians, with a chance to distinguish himself under the Emperor's very eye?

On the other hand, there were equally strong rumors that Iscaros was jealous of Pardes' chance to stay behind. That also made sense to Blade. In Karanopolis, Pardes could keep a close watch on his own network of friends and allies and clients. He could build it up, and perhaps strike a few solid blows against Iscaros' friends while their master was riding off to war.

Blade found highly amusing the thought of the two arch game-players both tearing their hair, each wishing he was in the other's place! It served them both right. Just as long as they both left him and Tera alone, he didn't care much which one did what to the other.

Eventually all the weapons were sharpened, all the horses were shod, all the carts were loaded with food, wine, tents, bedding, women, and everything else the army would need. It was time to go.

The Guardians were drawn up outside the gate of the Palace Quarter when Jores VII rode out to them. He rode an enormous black horse which he managed badly, and wore gilded armor which hung loosely on his lanky frame. He was not an inspiring figure.

Mercifully, he had sense not to give a speech. He simply rode down the line of the Guardians, then placed himself at the head of the First Regiment. His bodyguard, a hundred Guardians in specially silvered armor, formed a square around him. Then trumpets sounded all along the line of the Guardians and away into the distance. As the trumpets died away Blade heard officers and sergeants shouting to their men.

Blade turned his horse, ready for the orders to his own troop. He saw Zogades stiffen in his saddle, then turn and bellow, "Gold Troop-mooooove OUT!" Blade spurred his horse into motion, then relaxed.

For better or worse, he and Tera were off to war.

Chapter 14

The grand military parade lost a good deal of its grandeur before it got very far from the walls of Karanopolis. The Emperor exchanged his horse for a carriage draped in purple and silver. The dust rose in clouds from unpaved roads churned up by thousands of hooves and booted feet and iron-tired cart wheels. It clogged throats, stung eyes, and dulled the polish on armor, weapons, and leather. Blade emptied his water bottle twice, trying to clear his throat, then gave up trying.

That night Blade lay in his tent, Tera curled close against him, her hair flowing across his chest, one arm around her. Outside in the darkness he heard the sound of women and servants quarreling, drunken laughter, the squealing of stolen pigs and the clucking of stolen chickens. Apparently the Guardians thought they were doing a favor to every farmer whose stock they looted and every merchant whose daughters they raped.

"I'm not sure those bastards know what side they're on," said Blade sourly. "And I'm sure I wish I didn't have them on mine."

"They can fight," said Tera gently. "After all, if they couldn't, would either of us be here now?" There was no trace of bitterness in her voice, but it was still rare for her to make any reference to their capture.

"You are right, of course," said Blade, laughing. "But indeed I almost wish that they would forget how to fight, this time. That way few people will die, Jores VII will still get the glory of having led his troops into battle, and nobody will be much worse off for all the sound and fury."

"You almost make me believe you think that," said Tera.

"I wish I really could," said Blade. "But there is no way that I can be happy when I think of how badly the Guardians may fight. If they fight badly enough, we may both die." It would be the final disgrace for his luck to run out in this blasted Dimension!

But there was Tera in "this blasted Dimension." Blade drew her close against him, and felt not only desire but warm affection rise within him as her lips nuzzled at his throat.

The army took more than a month to march from Karanopolis to the Pass of Scador. Galleys and barges on the river brought supplies as far upstream as they could go. All the ships and boats of Karan put together could not have carried the army itself.

Sergeant Zogades left Blade in no doubt about what he thought of the strategy of the coming campaign.

"If we'd set out three months ago with an army a third this big, we'd have done more good." He made a sweeping gesture with one scarred, hairy arm that took in the whole army, Guardians, infantry, camp followers and all. "This whole lot is going to get up through the pass about the time the weather starts turning cold. We'll lose horses and men from the weather even if we don't see a single enemy. Then we'll start running into their ambushes, and we'll be running back through the pass with our asses smarting in a week or two."

"Won't the mountain tribes give warning of any Scadori ambushes?" asked Blade.

Zogades spat into the dust. "That for the mountain tribes. We frightened and bribed them into warning us about the Scadori raid where you were-uh, the last Scadori raid. The Scadori didn't know it, either. But I'm good and damned sure they know now. Any of the mountain tribes they've got their hands on are going to be too dead to help us. The others are going to be too damned scared. I think we're going to be on our own up on the plateau, and I don't like it."

Zogades was one of the few Guardians who had once been an infantryman, so he was one of the few who had seen real fighting. Officers as high as the commanders of Regiments were supposed to have asked for the old sergeant's advice.

So they marched on, and at the end of the month they reached the Pass of Scador.

The army that reached the pass was not quite as impressive as the army that set out from Karanopolis. Desertions, brawls, and camp diseases had taken their toll. Tera made quite a reputation for herself among the camp women, skillfully and tenderly nursing a good many of them through fevers.

But the horses were still sleek from lush grazing, weapons were sharp, armor was dusty but sound. The army was ready, and the Guardians were positively eager to cross the pass.

Zogades had things to say about that eagerness. "I've always thought most of them were a bunch of damned gilded fools. Now I know. Doesn't one of them know a single thing about war?"

Blade shrugged. "I'm beginning to wonder myself."

Zogades sighed. "Oh well, as long as they send up the infantry too there'll be a few people up there who know something."

The next day the word came down that the Guardians were to march through the pass and carry out the raid into Scador without the infantry. The Emperor himself would lead them.

Zogades was speechless for a while. Then all he could do was curse. He cursed all the officers of the Guardians, he cursed all the nobles of Karan, he cursed the Emperor. His face turned red under its tan and the graying fringe of hair on his almost bald head stood out in all directions like the quills of a porcupine.

After he ran out of curses, all he could say was, "I wonder what gold-armored clown thought this one up?"

Five days after the army arrived at the pass, the Guardians formed up for their march onto the plateau. Scouts reported no sign of the mountain tribes, but no sign of any Scadori either.

Blade was on his horse and Tera was in her wagon the morning the Emperor rode out in front of his Guardians, his bodyguard around him. He kept his speech mercifully short.

"Now is the moment when Our Guardians of the Coral Throne will smite the barbarians of Scador. Now is the moment when the barbarians will die or flee in terror, for they shall not stand against us. Now is the moment when the menace of the Scadori shall forever be lifted from Our loyal subjects."

"Now is the moment when Jores is going to say he is too sick in the gut to come with us," muttered Zogades. Anything else he said was drowned out by the blare of the trumpets and the thunder of the drums as the Guardians moved out.

Chapter 15

The Guardians wound upward through the Pass of Scador. Blade scanned the distant gray slopes as he rode. Nothing moved on the bare rock, either human or animal. Only a few birds wheeled high up in the lonely sky above the peaks.

To Blade's surprise, the Emperor's huge purple banner remained in the lead all the way up to the peak of the pass. It still led the Guardians as they rode down the other side onto the plateau of Scador. When they finally pitched camp for the night, the Emperor's tent was in the center of the great circle the Guardians formed.

Zogades was only mildly impressed. "I can't see how anything could be dangerous this close to the pass. I'm damned sure Jores knows that too. So for the moment he's not worried. Or maybe he's just more afraid of looking bad than he is of the Scadori. I wonder how long the young fellow's nerve's going to last."

Blade shrugged. "As long as he thinks he needs to look good, I suppose. If his reputation takes a big knock now, when he's only been on the Coral Throne three years and hasn't got any children..." Blade let his voice trail off under Zogades' warning stare. He'd said all he felt needed saying, in any case.

He went off toward his tent, and Tera. Around him silence was descending on the camp as people drifted off to sleep. The only lights were the small watchfires of the sentries and the lanterns hung on the Imperial tent.

Blade would have liked more fires. No campfires meant nothing to drive away the cold that could turn a man's nose or fingers white with frostbite. No campfires meant that the ghost-filled darkness of the

plateau could crowd much too close.

Blade sighed wearily. He wasn't a magician who could conjure wood out of the barren plateau of Scador. For the moment he was only a trooper in the Guardians of the Coral Throne. There was nothing he could do now except return to his tent and find the warmth he always found with Tera.

But as he walked through the sleeping camp, he could not help hearing the thin, chill moan of the wind as it swept across the miles.

That wind was in Blade's ears for the next week, day and night. He awoke in cold gray dawns hearing it whistling around the tent. He went to bed with Tera warm against him, hearing it as he drifted off to sleep.

The wind was in everyone's ears, and men less iron-nerved than Blade got nightmares from it. Every morning there were always a few men missing, men who had mounted up and ridden headlong back toward the pass. There were usually a few others found lying stiff and gray-faced, their own bloody swords clutched in their hands, gaping wounds in throats or wrists or stomachs. The people left alive rode with faces twisted and pale. The army seemed to be waiting for something horrible to come sweeping down upon it on the wings of that endless grim wind.

Meanwhile they marched on across the plateau. Patrols rode out each morning. The main body never saw a live Scadori, and the patrols saw only small bands of warriors, some mounted, some on foot. The warriors fought even more desperately than usual if the Guardians did come up with them. So every one of those skirmishes left a few more empty saddles in the Emperor's Regiments.

"Damn it, where are they?" exploded Zogades one night. "Blade, you marched with them. Where could the bastards have gone that we can't come up with them? At least the ones we catch aren't scared of us, that's for sure!"

Blade honestly wished he could answer that question.

He didn't like the feeling of pursuing a race of ghosts any better than any of the other Guardians. But he could only guess.

"I saw no towns or villages when we passed through here on our march to the pass this spring," he said. "Of course that doesn't prove there aren't any. I won't claim I see everything-"

"That makes you more honest than most of the officers," said Zogades, with a smile that was half a grimace as well.

"Anyway, if there aren't any towns or villages, the Scadori could flee easily. Pack up their tents, drive off their herds, shoulder their spears, and head for the horizon."

The next day the scouts did discover a fair-sized Scadori town, perhaps half the size of Ukush. It lay abandoned and stripped of everything that could be moved. The only things that moved in its empty streets were a few half-starved dogs and the endlessly blowing wind. The main column of the Guardians marched past the town that afternoon. Blade noticed how even Zogades turned his eyes away from the empty houses. The abandoned town was not a pleasant sight for men with nerves already stretched tight.

"It's like coming on a body all ripped up and chewed when you're out in the woods at night," said Zogades. He looked back over his shoulder as the town slowly dropped out of sight. "It makes you wonder what might be out there in the woods along with you."

Blade had one or two ideas about what the Scadori might be up to. Their best course would be to refuse battle until the Guardians moved onto some rough ground where their horses would not give them such an advantage. That meant the Scadori would not offer battle out here on the open plateau. They would wait-and wait, and wait, and wait, if necessary. But this was only a guess, so Blade kept his mouth shut.

Two days later the Karani came on a Scadori town before the people completely abandoned it. A last party of women and children with their bundles of possessions was captured. So was a small herd of cattle and the score of old men and boys driving it off.

Except for a few who tried to run, most of the Scadori were captured alive. They would have done better to die trying to run. Those who were captured also died very slowly. They died of every torture that the ingenuity and the available equipment of the Karani could inflict. The torture and the screams went on all night, as hundreds of the Guardians shoved and elbowed each other for the best places to watch. A few hideously mangled bodies still showed signs of life at dawn.

Blade kept as far away as possible. He managed to eat a few mouthfuls of half-raw beef hacked from the slaughtered cattle. He would have given most of even that small share to Tera if she had been able to eat. But for once her courage failed her. All she could do was shrink deeper and deeper into the blankets, hold her hands over her ears, and lie shaking and sobbing. All Blade could do was sit by her, stroke her hair, and wish them all out of this cursed lonely plateau.

The next morning it seemed as though his wishes were going to be answered. When the main column moved out, the Emperor's banner soon began to swing back toward the northeast.

Toward the Pass of Scador? Blade took the first chance he got to ask Zogades.

The sergeant shrugged. "I don't see where else we can wind up," he said. "Word is, some of the prisoners talked before they died. Said all the warriors of all the tribes of Scador were heading off to the west."

Blade looked back over his shoulder toward the flat bleak horizon in that direction. It looked as if the plateau went on and on to the end of the world.

Zogades nodded. "Right. Nobody had the stomach for taking all the Guardians off that way, the gods themselves don't know how far, and no way to know if we'll ever come up with the Scadori before our horses start dying under us. It's getting cold here, and it's going to get a damned sight colder damned fast before much longer. So I guess the big heads around the Emperor must have talked him out of going any farther."

The weather was indeed getting colder. The second night of the march it snowed, just enough to leave the ground shimmering white until the sun rose high enough. But it was a taste of things to come, and the column increased its pace. The horses were getting thin now, but their riders took extra care of them. No one wanted to be left up here on the lonely plateau with its wind and its ghostly Scadori.

By the evening of the sixth day of the return march, Blade could see the mountains that rimmed the plateau to the north and east rising against the sky. The summits and upper slopes gleamed white with snow. Up there, no doubt, lay the answer to what had happened to the mountain tribes. But Blade now found that mystery totally uninteresting. All that interested him now was how fast they could march through the pass that lay out of sight below those distant mountains.

Just before darkness fell, word went around the camp that a party of refugees had arrived from the mountain tribes. At first Blade couldn't see what difference that made. Then the rumors started getting more and more detailed.

The refugees, it was said, were bringing word of a Scadori invasion of their mountains. More than two thousand Scadori warriors were roaming through the lands of the tribes that had helped the Karani, slaughtering men, women, children, even animals. There would not be one of the mountain people left alive when winter came if the Karani did not come to their aid.

In desperation the tribes had set aside all their past quarrels and gathered together on one mountain. There the Scadori had them besieged. In a few more days starvation and cold would drive them out into a last battle, from which not one of them would escape.

The gods themselves would curse the Karani if they did not send aid!

Blade personally felt that the gods would be more likely to curse the Karani for being complete idiots if they ran off into the mountains with winter coming on! But he hadn't realized how frustrated the Guardians were after the long weary march across the plateau. When the word went around that the Scadori were only two days' march away, cheers went up to the sky from all over the camp. It might be idiotic, but suddenly everyone was wild with joy. At last they could get their hands on a bunch of those damned stinking Scadori! Oh, how they'd make the bastards pay for all the cold and weariness and frustration! The night air was filled with bloodcurdling threats.

Blade could understand the Guardians' feelings. He also suspected that even if they hadn't felt that way, Jores VII would have. This was the young Emperor's last chance to make his first campaign even a small triumph, instead of a large disgrace that could only encourage his numerous enemies.

The weather up in the mountains would be uncertain, perhaps dangerous. The land was rough and unknown. Even a handful of Scadori could fight on fairly equal terms, then fade away into the forests where the Guardians would have to dismount to follow them.

Even worse, suppose there were more than just a handful of Scadori? It made no sense to Blade that the enemy would divide their forces this way. The warriors sent to attack the mountain tribes were too far from the rest of their comrades to be helped. The Scadori were too good to make that stupid mistake.

At least, that was the way Blade saw them. But he was the only one who had seen the Scadori freeze the inside. Who would listen to what he had to say, a former slave of unknown origins? Who would believe him, even if they listened politely? Blade felt all sorts of uncertainties about this march up into the mountains. But he was also quite certain that he couldn't do anything except keep his mouth shut and be ready to fight for his life.

Chapter 16

The next morning the Guardians moved out much earlier than usual. For the first time in weeks men were smiling and even singing as they formed up in column. For the first time in weeks they felt they were moving toward something.

That evening they pushed on until it was almost dark, then camped in their marching formation. During the night the officers moved about the camp, sorting out the servants, women, baggage boys, and the rest of the camp followers. At last the Guardians were stripping down for action. Seven thousand of them

would ride up into the mountains with only the food and gear they could carry on their war horses. A single regiment would remain behind to guard the camp and patrol toward the Pass of Scador and the infantry holding it.

Blade had a nervous moment when he heard that a regiment would be staying behind to guard the camp where Tera would be staying. Left unprotected in a camp commanded by Iscaros, Tera would be lucky to live twenty-four hours. Fortunately, Iscaros' regiment didn't get the job. The one that did had a commander who was perhaps the silliest of all the noble fops in the Guardians. But at least he was no friend of Iscaros or enemy of Blade and Tera.

The seven thousand Guardians were on the move well before daylight the next morning. By dawn they were in the foothills of the mountains. By the time they stopped for a quick breakfast of bread and salt meat they were several thousand feet above the plateau. Blade could see it spreading out below them to the south and west. Far away toward the horizon was the faint smudge on the land marking the base camp.

The Emperor's purple banner still flapped in the morning breeze at the head of the column. Blade had to admit that Jores VII was showing unexpected courage. The Guardians were moving into unknown and possibly hostile territory, with only the refugees from the mountain tribes to guide them. Yet the Emperor was holding his place at the head of his troops.

The air started to become thinner as they moved higher, and the horses began to labor. Zogades was getting edgy. "We're going to be getting up there too damned close to dark for my liking," he growled. "We won't be in too good shape to make a safe camp, and that's not smart with the enemy sure to be close. Even a couple hundred Scadori could make a mess if we're not ready for them."

"Everybody's too busy thinking of killing a couple of thousand Scadori," said Blade sourly. "Nobody's thinking of being attacked by a couple of hundred."

By early afternoon the column was winding around the base of a mountain. On the other side of the mountain lay a narrow pass. Beyond that pass lay the besieged tribesmen and their enemies.

By the time Blade's regiment swung around the flank of the mountain, the Emperor's banner was already well up into the pass. Blade looked at the steep, heavily forested sides of the pass. It would slow the whole column down to put out scouts on the flanks, for they would have to go on foot. Speed was certainly important. But was it as important as finding out what lay in those miles of thick pine forest stretching up toward the sky on either side of the marching Guardians? Blade didn't think so.

The pass was about five miles long. As Blade's regiment entered it, he realized this was just long enough to hold the whole column of Guardians. Looking ahead, he could see the purple banner still in the lead.

In another half hour the last regiment was into the pass. Looking ahead now, Blade saw a smudge of yellow smoke rising from the forest to the left. The color didn't look quite natural, but he was looking into the sun and couldn't be sure. When he looked again the smoke was gone.

Then he looked toward the rear of the column. The last troop of the last regiment was now a good half-mile up into the pass. Beyond it, at the very mouth of the pass, two thick columns of blue smoke coiled up from the trees.

Blade knew suddenly that the Scadori were watching the Guardians climb the pass. That was not too much of a surprise. It would be only common sense on their part. What bothered Blade was something

else. Was watching all the Scadori were doing?

Blade's question was answered almost before he finished asking it. The familiar sounds of the marching column vanished in a sudden, terrible uproar. Scadori trumpets blared, Scadori drums thundered, Scadori warcries rose shrill and harsh all up and down the pass. Bushes and branches crashed and crackled as the warriors of Scador swarmed down from the forest to the attack.

Blade knew that he would never see a better ambush carried out on any battlefield in any Dimension.

In a few moments Blade realized that he might not ever be seeing much of anything more. A quick glance up and down the column told him the whole grim story. He could see several thousand Scadori already in action. Hundreds more were swarming out of the trees at every moment, slashing, stabbing, and yelling like fiends. Where the warriors hadn't yet closed in, they were sending volleys of arrows and spears into the ranks of the Guardians.

The noise doubled as the Guardians recovered from their shock and started defending themselves. Their warcries and the frantic screams and whinnings of maimed and dying horses made a hideous uproar. Their arrows whistled into the bushes and into the oncoming Scadori, their swords flashed down and came up dripping blood, their darts flew through the air and drove through warriors' shields and the warriors carrying them.

But Blade knew that the battle was lost the moment the jaws of the ambush closed on the column. There were too many Scadori. Too many of them were getting in too close. Time after time a Scadori warrior ran in under a Guardian's sword and thrust a spear or a knife upward into his enemy's horse. Time after time the horse went down, a scream bubbling in the blood from its gaping throat or its intestines tangled around its hooves. Some Guardians went down with their horses and never rose again. Some by luck or skill stayed on their feet. But the Scadori swarmed around them, so the best they could usually do was to take an enemy with them. Guardian and Scadori would go down together, stabbing and clawing and even biting at each other in a last murderous death-grapple.

Once more Blade found himself obeying his reflexes as a fighting man. Never mind what he thought of the Karani, the Guardians, or the idiotic generalship that had led to this disaster! The Scadori coming at him out of the woods were going to kill him if he didn't kill them first. He didn't have it in him to die without a fight.

So as the first of the Scadori ran at him, Blade made his horse rear. Iron-shod hooves lashed out, smashing the warrior's head to a pulp and bowling him head over heels. A second warrior hesitated for a moment. That moment was long enough for Blade to sink a dart into the man's skull exactly between the eyes. Then the ground seemed to sprout Scadori warriors. Blade downed another with a second dart, then unslung his shield, drew the long cavalry broadsword, and went to work.

He had the advantage in height, he had the advantage in reach, he had the advantage in striking power. He slashed through necks and hacked off arms that reached out toward him. Blood splashed unwounded Scadori and the flanks and neck of Blade's horse. The horse squealed and whinnied in fear and rage, but Blade kept it under control. It went on rearing, smashing down with its hooves, snapping with bared teeth, kicking backward and sideways. It impartially knocked down the living and trampled the dead and dying underfoot. It threw almost as much terror into the attacking warriors as Blade's whirling sword did.

Blade was a magnificent archery target. But the Scadori archers were afraid to shoot when their comrades were so thickly clustered around Blade. Their arrows found other targets up and down the Guardians' crumbling column.

Eventually the Scadori pulled back from around Blade. Fifteen or twenty of them lay still or writhed and moaned on ground now soaked and slippery with blood and mangled human flesh. Blade knew that would be the moment when the archers opened fire. He sprang down from his horse, snatched up his own bow and quiver, and began searching for targets for his own arrows.

Blade's tremendous fight had cleared away the Scadori from immediately around him. Those who weren't dead had fled into the woods. Under cover of the pines they were slipping up and down the pass in search of easier prey elsewhere along the column.

Even in the fading light Blade could see that half the Guardians were already dead or at least no longer fighting back. He knew they would all be dead before long. The Scadori seldom took male prisoners, and never from the hated Riders of Death.

The Scadori archers seemed to have stopped shooting. But they had brought down practically all the Guardians' horses. Now the surviving Guardians were holding barricades of their dead horses and their dead comrades. They were holding them with desperate courage, and they were killing a good many Scadori. But it was a doomed last stand. Any Guardian who was not clear of the pass before darkness would be dead before sunrise. Darkness was less than an hour away, so there were not going to be many survivors from the Guardians of the Coral Throne.

The Emperor's banner no longer waved against the sky at the head of the pass. Blade could not even make out the silvered armor of the Emperor's bodyguard in the chaos of fighting men that stretched for miles up the pass. Was Jores VII already dead? If he died here in the pass along with the Guardians of his throne, there would be ten kinds of hell to pay in Karan!

A moment later Blade saw a particularly solid mass of Guardians moving toward him along the edge of the woods. Then he noticed that their armor glinted silver. At least the Emperor's bodyguard was trying to make its retreat in some sort of order.

A few yards at a time, the bodyguard crept down the pass toward Blade, making its way past the dead and the dying, skirting the stray horses wandering about. Blade took cover behind a dead horse, restocked his quiver from the dead bodies sprawled all around him, and waited. He wasn't at all sure he was going to get out of the pass alive. But his chances would be better if he went with the bodyguard.

Slowly but surely, the bodyguard approached. But the Scadori were getting bolder. Every few yards another Guardian was left sprawled or writhing on the ground. The Scadori closed in behind, cutting the throats of the wounded. Sometimes they ran off holding the blood-dripping genitals of the dead men on the points of their swords and spears. The bodyguard closed ranks to fill in the gaps left by the fallen and moved on.

They were only fifty yards away when Blade saw a tall, lanky figure in torn and filthy robes moving among the soldiers. About the last thing he had expected to see was Jores VII alive and on his feet. A thought flashed into Blade's mind. He would be doing the rest of his day's fighting under the eye of the Emperor himself. If they both survived to return to Karan, the Emperor would have cause to remember. Perhaps he would even be grateful, although Blade didn't have much faith in the gratitude of princes and potentates.

The leading rank of the bodyguards was only a stone's throw away when Blade slung his bow, drew his sword, and rose from cover. He took a few steps toward the safety of the square around the Emperor. Then the woods erupted in Scadori war-cries and Scadori warriors swarmed out from behind every tree.

Their onrush panicked a score of the stray horses. All of them bolted and several crashed into the rear of the square. Soldiers went down under the trampling hooves and the solid ranks around the Emperor suddenly gaped open in several places. Scadori leaders shouted and waved spears and swords, then led a wild charge toward the weak spots. Blade saw the Emperor stiffen and draw a long curved sword. Its jeweled hilt blazed even in the fading light.

Blade ran toward the bodyguard, both swords drawn. Scadori arrows whistled about his ears as he ran, yelling war-cries and curses. He came up with the first Guardians just as the Scadori pushed through the last of the Emperor's defenders and swarmed around him.

Jores recoiled only a few steps from the charge. Then he stopped and his sword whirled through the air in front of him. Guardians moved up on either flank, some holding out their lances like pikes while others thrust and slashed with their swords.

Blade pushed his way through the bodyguard into the front rank, to the left of the Emperor. Jores recognized Blade and gave him a quick, almost cat-like wave with his left hand. Then he picked up a shield from the ground and continued his fight. Jores VII was not a swordsman whose skill would inspire songs and poems down through the ages. But he was far above the average, as a good many Scadori warriors found out.

One by one the attacking Scadori sprawled on the blood-soaked ground, limped and staggered away, or simply drew back to a safe distance. Blade started to see the grim resignation fading from the faces around him. Some of the men were grinning, teeth startlingly white in faces darkened by dirt and drying blood.

Blade couldn't feel so hopeful. There was too much of the pass still to cover, then long miles of marching in darkness through a land barely known. Long before they could reach safety, the Scadori would regroup, discover that the richest prize of all was slipping out of their grasp, and launch an irresistible attack. It was too much to hope for that the Scadori army had fallen apart in its moment of victory.

The Guardians of the bodyguard reformed around their Emperor, and began to march down the pass at almost a trot. There were less than fifty of them now, but the Scadori seemed to have entirely broken up into twos and threes and half-dozens. A few showed fight and were promptly cut down. Most took cover in the woods.

The Guardians and the Emperor covered half a mile this way. They passed thousands of bodies of men and horses. More and more of the men had been castrated or otherwise mutilated. The smiles vanished from the faces around Blade. Now it was clear to everyone that they would be almost the only ones to win clear. In less than an hour, most of the Guardians of the Coral Throne had been erased from the rolls of the army of the Empire of Karan.

Three-quarters of a mile. A full mile. Scadori archers were opening up again with random arrows. Two more Guardians went down, others staggered along with blood dripping from shoulders or thighs. But they were now more than halfway to the lower end of the pass. The land beyond looked clear of Scadori. Jores VII sheathed his sword, slung his shield, and marched with his head held higher than Blade had ever seen it. There was a warrior's pride in the young Emperor now. That might mean a great deal for the future, if Jores ever saw Karanopolis again.

Then once more Scadori war-cries struck Blade's ears. Running figures poured out of the forest to form a solid wall in front of the Emperor's handful of Guardians. Many of the enemy now wore looted

Guardians' armor and waved captured swords and lances. Jores drew his sword again and yelled, "Charge! Charge them before they form! It is our only chance!"

The Emperor and his forty unwounded Guardians charged downhill at the massing Scadori. Arrows whistled about their ears, but they were moving at a dead run, too fast to make good targets in the twilight. Blade drew his short sword and held his lance out in front of him as if he was charging on horseback. On either side of him the Guardians did the same. They dashed at the Scadori with their lances bristling around them like the quills of a porcupine.

Now Blade heard another explosion of noise behind him. The harsh bray of Scadori trumpets echoed up and down the darkening pass. Then came the sound of dozens of fast-moving horses. The Guardians crashed into the Scadori in front of them. Blade thrust one enemy in the groin with his lance and chopped half through the man's neck as he screamed and crumpled forward. Then Blade turned to look behind him.

Thirty-odd Scadori were charging downhill on captured Karani horses. As they broke into a gallop they howled their war-cries. Several of the horses shied at the noise and sent their riders sprawling, to scream out their lives as hooves pounded them to bloody rags. But the rest came on, waving swords and clumsily brandishing lances. In the lead was a tall Scadori warrior Blade recognized as Chudo. Chudo of Ukush, once Blade's follower and comrade in battle. Chudo of Ukush, leading a wild charge that in a few more seconds would sweep Blade and the last of the Guardians away or trample them into the blood-soaked earth.

Blade hurled his lance straight at Chudo's horse. It took the unlucky animal in the chest. It reared with a bubbling scream, and Chudo threw himself out of the saddle. By a miracle he landed on his feet, and by another miracle managed to avoid being trampled by his own men. But several of them piled up behind his dying horse. Those who didn't fall had to struggle frantically to control their rearing, plunging, panic-stricken mounts.

Some of the Guardians now managed to get off a few arrows. More of the improvised Scadori cavalymen went headfirst out of their saddles, more of their comrades piled up behind dying horses. But more than half the Scadori were left alive and mounted, to charge straight home.

For a moment Blade was sure he was simply going to be crushed flat, like a worm under a steamroller. Horses and men pressed all around him. The smells of sweat and blood were overpowering. He stabbed, pushed, kicked, elbowed, roared curses. He would have used his teeth if he'd been able to reach anything with them. A hoof nearly came down on his foot. His short sword opened a horseman's leg to the bone. Blade grabbed the bloody leg and heaved. The man came out of the saddle with a yell.

Blade grabbed for the saddlebow without waiting for the man to land, then hurled himself into the saddle. All around him was a hideous tangle of men and horses, both men and animals fighting for their lives.

In the next moment a clear space opened in front of Blade. In the moment after that someone reeled back against Blade's horse. Blade looked down, and saw that it was the Emperor. The decision exploded in his mind. He dropped the reins, reached down with both hands, and grabbed His Sacred Majesty by the collar of his filthy purple tunic. The Emperor shot into the air with a choked-off yell of surprise. Before he could draw a full breath he was perched on the saddle behind Blade.

"In the name of whatever you worship, hold on!" Blade roared. He drew his broadsword and dug his spurs into the horse. It leaped forward, and Scadori darted out of its path.

One enemy warrior stood his ground-Chudo. Blade saw him holding a long heavy spear, ready to thrust it into the horse. Once Chudo had been Blade's comrade. Now that spear he held meant nothing but Blade's death. Blade jerked the horse to one side. Chudo's first thrust missed its mark. Before he could make another Blade's sword whistled down on Chudo's bare head. The skull split apart from crown to chin. Chudo sprawled face down among the bodies carpeting the ground, and the sword flew out of Blade's hand. The horse reached a canter, then a gallop, tore through the last thin line of Scadori, and went thundering away downhill. A few arrows sailed after Blade, but all of them went wide in the gathering darkness. Then the last sounds of battle faded away to the rear. Blade and His Sacred Majesty Jores VII of Karan were alone in the darkness, the only sound the furious pounding of the hooves of the horse under them.

Chapter 17

Blade and the Emperor soon left the pass and the mountain below it behind them. At that point Blade let the horse slow from a gallop to a trot. It was beginning to stagger, and it would have dropped dead long since if the whole mad gallop hadn't been downhill.

Even downhill, the weary, half-starved horse could carry the two men only so far. It plodded on through the night, moving more and more slowly as the hours passed. It finally collapsed when dawn was appearing in the eastern sky, and the open plateau was visible beyond the last foothill.

Blade saw that the horse would never get to its feet again and put it out of its misery with a quick slash of his sword. Then he drank and washed off some of the caked filth and blood in a small stream nearby. After that he felt it was time to pay some attention to His Sacred Majesty Jores VII.

The Emperor was sitting on a stump, his sword across his bony knees. His head drooped until his chin touched his chest, and his shoulders sagged. He seemed numb and dazed, either with exhaustion or with the horror of seeing a whole army of his finest troops wiped out around him. The courage he had shown in the battle might revive later, but for now he was clearly a man at the end of his tether.

"Your Majesty," said Blade gently. He had to repeat his call several times before the Emperor raised his head. "Your Majesty, forgive me for my breach of the law in addressing you, but-

Jores VII found the energy for a harsh, dry-throated laugh. "Does the law matter here and now? There are none to hear except the birds in the sky and the insects that crawl under the logs. So speak your mind."

"Your Majesty, I think we had better move on as soon as possible and get out on the plateau. The commander of the camp will surely be sending patrols out toward the mountains. We are more likely to meet them, and less likely to meet more Scadori."

"Very well, Blade. That makes good sense. You have Our permission to move on."

Blade kept quiet until he was able to find neutral words. "Your Majesty does not wish to go farther?"

Jores' fatigue-reddened eyes met Blade's. "In Our place, would you? Seven thousand of Our soldiers lie dead up there." He waved a hand toward the north. "We see clearly now that it was Our own lack of wisdom and great desire for glory early in Our reign that caused this. Our soldiers were dead before the Scadori struck a blow." Jores' voice was that of a man who would like to burst into tears but knows that he shouldn't.

Blade wasn't sure whether the Emperor was inviting his comments or not. But he could hardly be punished for making them. He spoke slowly.

"It is not for me to argue with my Emperor about the causes of what has happened. But Your Majesty has asked what I would do if I were in his place. I would continue on, to the camp on the plateau. There I would rally what remains of the Guardians and lead them and all the camp followers and the infantry at the pass out of Scador."

"What good will that do?"

"The loss of the Guardians does not mean that all is lost. Your Majesty's army is still strong, and the Scadori have also lost many warriors this day. You also have many loyal subjects who look for leadership to the Coral Throne. If you die here in the mountains, there will be none to lead them."

"There is truth in that," said Jores slowly. "We have no son."

Blade nodded. He might be taking a risk by saying, this, but there would never be a better time for it. "There is also this. Your Majesty has a good many overmighty subjects with great ambitions for themselves and their friends. If you vanish in the snows of Scador, many will give free rein to their ambitions. The Empire can afford yesterday's defeat. But it cannot afford to be divided by the plots and wars these ambitious men and women will unleash. It will fall. Then the Scadori will camp in the ruins of Karanopolis and send their Karani slaves to fight in the High Arena!"

The Emperor held up a hand to halt Blade's oratory. "We understand your concern for Our subjects. But this is a matter We must decide. We shall sit apart for a time, and return when We have decided." The Emperor rose and walked stiffly off into the trees.

Blade would have liked to hold him back or at least follow him. He was not happy about letting the Emperor out of sight in the man's present mood. But he couldn't push things too far. He had the Emperor's ear for the moment, but he could easily lose it.

A few days before, Blade could not have shown this much concern for the fate of Karan or anyone in it except Tera and Zogades. Now he found himself pleading with the Emperor himself. What had happened?

Blade wasn't sure. By now he was tired and hungry enough to be a little foggy-minded. But perhaps it was simple enough. He could not manage to completely ignore the fate of a good many million more or less innocent Karani. He didn't like their lust for blood in the High Arena, or many other things about them. But he couldn't quite walk away and let their world collapse about their ears when he could do something to help.

Blade shrugged. One of these days that tender conscience of his was probably going to get him killed. But there wasn't anything he could do about it, and probably never would be.

After about an hour the Emperor came back and sat down on the same log. It was full daylight now. Blade saw that the Emperor had washed his face and combed his hair with his fingers. He still looked ready to fall on his face with exhaustion. But he also looked like a man finally at peace with himself.

"Blade."

"Your Majesty." Blade knelt.

"You have spoken truly of Our duty. We shall return to Karan and lead Our subjects in avenging this defeat."

Blade bowed his head even more, but said nothing to show the relief he felt inside. He suspected there was more to come.

"Your counsel has been immensely wise this day. In fact, it might be said that you have saved Our life twice in two days, and many of Our subjects as well. We are exceedingly grateful.

"Therefore, it is Our wish that from this day forward you shall be a Lord General in Our service, and receive all the rewards and honors that accompany the rank. It also is Our wish that you serve at Our right hand, and continue to give us the same good service and good counsel that you have given us these two days."

"Your Majesty is gracious beyond what I deserve."

"Oh, nonsense," said Jores, with sudden cheerful contempt. "The gods alone know how much you've done for Karan. It would be damned stupid not to put you where you can go on doing even more. Ah-you may raise your head, Blade. As a Lord General you have noble rank and can look the Emperor in the face."

Blade raised his head and looked at Jores VII. On the thin, unshaven face was the first smile Blade had ever seen there.

Jores' good intentions weren't enough by themselves to get the two men safely out of the mountains and back to the camp. That also took hard marching and a good deal of luck.

They took everything they could carry from the dead horse, including a chunk of its flesh which they ate raw as they marched. They headed down through the pass and were on level ground by noon. Blade set a course straight across the plateau toward the camp and they moved out at a good clip. After the first few hours it was obvious that Jores was staying on his feet by sheer will power. But he did stay on his feet, and gradually the mountains sank down toward the horizon behind them.

Blade was prepared to walk all that night and all the next day if they had to. But just before dark a patrol sent out from the camp met them. The officer in command was stunned to learn of the disaster, although he had already suspected something of the kind. He was much too stunned to worry much about Blade's sudden elevation in rank, or object to obeying Blade's orders. They reached the camp about midnight.

Fortunately the camp was not completely defenseless. The commander of the regiment on guard had wanted to lead his Guardians up into the mountains at the first rumors of the battle. But he fell off his horse and broke an arm. The second in command had more sense and realized that it would be complete folly to leave the camp without any protection at all.

Since the camp was more or less secure, Blade and the Emperor decided to remain in position for a few more days. There might be some survivors of the massacre still making their way out of the mountains.

There were. By the time everyone marched off toward the Pass of Scador, several hundred survivors had trickled in. To Blade's delight Zogades was among them. He not only marched out himself, he led a band of twenty he had rallied around him. Blade promptly used his new rank to promote Zogades to the rank of captain.

Unfortunately Count Iscaros also got clean away from the slaughter of the Guardians. He was honorably wounded, so there was no way he could be called a coward. But at least Blade could enjoy the spectacle Iscaros made of himself when he discovered Blade's new position. The count was loudly indignant at the idea of a former Arena slave who had slain his Three now being a Lord General, and much more in the Emperor's favor than he himself was or probably ever would be! Blade wondered what Pardes would say, when he found out what had happened.

For better or worse, Blade was no longer a piece in the game Iscaros and Pardes were playing. All at once he was a player himself, whether he liked it or not. There was nothing to do but play as well as he could.

Chapter 18

Blade promptly found himself working twice as hard as a general as he had when he was an ordinary trooper in the Guardians. The only difference was that instead of carrying out orders he gave them. Like generals in every other Dimension, the generals of Karan spent more time in chairs wielding pens than they did in the saddle wielding swords and lances.

Blade liked to lead from in front when it came time for him to lead in battle. But there wasn't any battle in prospect. The job at hand was getting the whole mass of largely unarmed people in the camp safely through the Pass of Scador. Fortunately the Scadori were either too weak or too complacent to follow up their victory by driving the Karani infantry away from the pass. A heavy fall of snow could also have made things difficult, but there too luck was with the Karani.

"Perhaps the gods think they have punished us enough already," said the Emperor to Blade. They were riding side by side at the head of the column as it wound its way up from the plateau, toward the pass.

"Perhaps," said Blade. "Certainly seven thousand or more Guardians is a generous sacrifice to even the most bloodthirsty of gods!"

At the pass, Jores held a council of war with all the generals on hand, introducing Blade to them. Blade noticed a few of the more elegant generals glowering at him, but none dared openly defy the Emperor by being openly hostile. They simply voted down every point Blade raised, instead.

That was bad. Blade was convinced that the Pass of Scador and the frontier lands of Karan could and should be held by the infantry regiments alone. Or at least he was convinced this should be tried.

But the generals had never considered fighting a major war without the Guardians of the Coral Throne. As far as Blade could tell, none of them had the faintest idea of how to do so. All they could think of was pulling far back from the Pass of Scador.

"What will be said of us if the Scadori then swarm through the pass and ravage all the frontier lands for many days' travel into the Empire?" snapped Blade angrily.

Several of the generals shrugged this off. It was notorious that the nobility had few or no estates along the frontier, and distrusted the stubbornly independent free farmers there. One said, "Much will certainly be said of us if we continue the fight against the Scadori blindly, and lose thousands more soldiers. Much may be done to us, as well."

Even Jores nodded at those words. The general had put his beringed finger squarely on something on the

mind of everyone here in the tent. What would the mob in Karanopolis do? What was the best way of keeping them quiet?

Jores VII was a better man than he had been when he led the Guardians up through the Pass of Scador. But neither his new self-confidence nor Blade's urgings could make him willing to go against the advice of eight of his senior generals. The Imperial Order went down: the lands around the pass are to be abandoned. Aid will be given to those farmers who wish to flee. Those who stay will stay at their own peril.

Afterward, in private, Jores said he was not completely sure he had done the right thing. "But what could I do, when everyone except you told me that to try to hold the frontier lands would be to risk throwing a second army after the first one? And what would that bring to Karan, except disaster?" When he was alone with Blade, Jores had taken to dropping the Imperial "We."

"True enough, if they are right. If they are not well, their own estates will be safe enough. The mob in Karanopolis will stay nothing, either."

"You sound bitter, Blade."

"I have seen the games played by the great nobles of Karan from below, Your Majesty. They do not look pretty from there."

"No, I suppose they would not. Do you think this has led nobles such as these generals to give bad advice?"

"It certainly could, Your Majesty. I would urge that you consult with other advisers and counselors upon your return to Karanopolis."

The Emperor frowned. "That seems wise. But who-oh, I know who to start with. It is obvious. The Second Master of War, Duke Pardes. He is the First Master in all but name, since the real First Master-Blade, why are you laughing?"

Blade fought down his laughter, nearly choking to death in the process. There was no way he could explain to the Emperor what was making him laugh. Now Pardes would not only learn about Lord General Blade, but have to deal with him.

Once more, Blade found himself wondering how even Pardes' iron self-control would stand up under the shock.

The order to abandon the frontier lands nearly caused a mutiny in some of the infantry regiments. A good many of their men were from the lands now to be abandoned. Nearly all of them thought the Guardians were overfed toy soldiers who'd finally gotten what they deserved. Practically no one saw any reason to abandon a good quarter of Karan simply because the Guardians had been stupid enough to get themselves cut to pieces in an ambush a child should have avoided.

Blade was tempted to say, "I told you so." But he knew it was wiser to hold his peace. It wouldn't take much to get some of the generals muttering that the upstart Blade was sympathizing with mutineers. Even a rumor of that could be enough to put a gold strangling cord around his neck. Too many Emperors had been overthrown by army mutinies led by ambitious generals.

Blade's new rank did mean at least one less worry for him-Tera's safety. A few words whispered in

Zogades' ear, and Tera was guarded night and day by a dozen picked soldiers, all of them old comrades of Zogades who hated and distrusted Iscaros. Any assassin or kidnapper would have had a job getting through to Tera, and an even harder job getting out alive.

Word of the disaster to the Guardians ran far ahead of the returning army. All the plans to shower the returning heroes with flowers and kisses shriveled up at once. When the army did return, a few thousand hardy souls braved a pouring rain to watch them march past. A few threw dead rats and rotten cabbages instead of flowers. As the soldiers returned to their barracks, their mood was as gloomy as the weather.

Princess Amadora promptly tried to improve at least the generals' mood by throwing one of her grand feasts, with Blade as guest of honor. She had a reputation as a hostess that went with her reputation as an ambitious politician. She seldom made up a guest list without an eye on what she might gain by it.

Blade was tempted to plead illness. But it would be a good opportunity to see one of his possible enemies in action on her home grounds. That would be useful. It would also probably annoy Count Iscaros considerably, which was a pleasant thought. Finally, Tera was as eager as a child to go and see all the mighty men and women of the Empire. So they went.

They both went dressed to the height of fashion, Blade in silvered armor and wreaths and Tera in white silk and dripping jewels. Most of this splendor was paid for by an unexpected gift, from none other than the eunuch Duke Pardes. It arrived three days after Blade's return, a chest containing three thousand pieces of gold and a short note delicately inked on silk:

Blade,

It seems proper now to give you some portion of the money you earned for me. Spend it to increase your own splendor. I make no prophecies as to what shall be the relations between us, for I am not a god. At this moment I am not your enemy, either.

Pardes

Blade could think of no reason not to do as Pardes suggested.

Pardes might have declared at least a temporary peace with Blade. But Count Iscaros was even more openly hostile than before. Princess Amadora paid so much attention to Blade that the count spent most of the evening glowering at him. He practically never looked at the princess.

He was about the only man at the feast who didn't. Amadora was aware of every bit of her attractiveness to men, and dressed accordingly. This evening she wore a simple gown of alternating strips of red and white silk that flowed down from her olive-tinted bare shoulders to the floor. It covered her completely, but the silk was thin enough not to leave very much to the imagination. She heightened that particular effect by judiciously rouging her breasts and pubic area. Massive gold bracelets and a tiara of rubies shimmering in her black hair completed the outfit.

The feast went on and on, until Blade lost count of the courses, the wines, and the entertainment. He managed to stay sober, however. He was also extremely careful to taste every wine and every dish before letting Tera take a single sip or bite. Count Iscaros was obviously still more unhappy about seeing his former slave-girl as the wife of a new rival and seated at the same table with him. The few times he took his eyes off Blade, it was to glare at Tera. If looks could have killed, Tera would have been dead several times over before the feast ended.

But eventually it did end. Princess Amadora made the rounds of her departing guests, giving each man a farewell kiss. When she came to Blade, she seemed to flow up against his body, warm wet lips caressing his slowly and carefully. It was an open and unmistakable gesture of desire.

But with Princess Amadora lust, like hospitality, was usually mixed with politics. Blade knew he had not just received an invitation from a beautiful woman. He had also received his first invitation to enter someone else's intrigues.

Chapter 19

It was soon clear that Princess Amadora wasn't the only noblewoman of Karan interested in Blade.

"But I think many of them are less interested in pleasure than in power," said Blade sourly one night, as he lay in bed with Tera. "I doubt if any of them know or care at all what kind of a person the Lord General Blade is. But I am sure they all care very much that he is a new and important military chief with the Emperor's ear. I suspect I could find out half of what is going on in Karan by going to bed with a few of them, if I wanted to."

"Why should you not want to," said Tera, somewhat surprised. "Many of them are not ugly, and it is in the hearts of men to find new women when they begin to grow tired of the old ones."

Blade could not miss the unmistakable note of fear in Tera's voice. Here she was among the nobles of Karan, with beautiful women throwing themselves at her husband's feet. Why shouldn't she be afraid he would sooner or later drift away from her, leaving her alone and helpless, with neither position, family, nor defense against her enemies?

Blade firmly took her in his arms. "Tera, it is not in my heart to grow tired of you. The gods willing, I will come back to you from wherever I may go." Except from Home Dimension, of course, and there was nothing he could do about that.

She stared at him, eyes wide. Once more he had done something she could hardly believe a man could do, by making this promise. "You will come back, even from Princess Amadora's bed?"

"Even from there, if I get there in the first place."

Tera laughed, and the fear was gone from her voice as she spoke. "You will certainly not find that woman trying to keep you out. I think you might even be wise to go there. She is an enemy to both of us, I think. In her bed, you might learn much of what she is thinking."

It was Blade's turn to laugh. "I might indeed. But what's got into you, Tera? Are you suddenly becoming fond of the games they play here in Karan?"

"I am fond of my own life and of yours," said the girl flatly. "In Karan, I have come to see there are things one must do to live that are not needed in Scador."

Scador was much on Blade's mind these days. With the Pass of Scador gaping open, the tribes were swarming down into the frontier lands of Karan, doing everything Blade had expected they would do. Thousands of farmers were driven from their homes, and scores of villages and small towns went up in flames. Improvised Scadori cavalry, mounted on captured horses, raided far and wide, sometimes reaching nearly halfway to Karanopolis itself. The Karani infantry tramped up and down the country, and the farmers themselves took up boar spears and hunting bows to defend their fields and families. But the

tribesmen were here, there, and everywhere, as elusive and painful as a cloud of wasps.

It was soon clear that they were going to spend the winter in Karan. No invader of the Empire had done that in three hundred years. The Emperor called a special conference of his most trusted military advisers to discuss this crisis.

Once more Blade urged a bold course of action. They should do like the Scadori themselves. Every fighting man who could ride should climb on the back of any horse that would carry him, and all should ride to the Pass of Scador. Cut off from their homeland, the tribesmen might panic, retreat toward the pass, and be forced into a pitched battle. If they didn't retreat, a mounted force could burn their camps and defeat their roving bands one by one.

If Duke Pardes had been at the conference, he might have helped Blade. But the big eunuch was in bed at his country estate, injured in a fall from his horse. That was bad luck for everyone except Pardes' enemies and those generals who still couldn't make up their minds how to fight a war without the Guardians of the Coral Throne. Once more they banded together to vote down Blade, and once more Jores VII couldn't nerve himself to ignore their vote.

Blade was so furious that he was afraid he might burst out in a rage at the Emperor himself. To avoid that disaster, he left the Palace at once, stalking out into the windy darkness. Normally he would not have tried walking home, even in the Palace Quarter. But tonight he didn't care. He felt he would almost welcome a chance to fight off a few robbers, to work off his rage and frustration. Any robbers who met him in his present mood would regret it, if they lived long enough.

He was more than halfway home when a carriage with four horses and two outriders overtook him. As he stepped aside to let it pass, a woman stuck her head out the window and hailed him.

"Lord Blade! What has you walking here and alone, at this hour?"

It was Princess Amadora. Blade instinctively sized up the opposition, in case things came to a fight. The two outriders were both armed, but they were only two, and one of them was gray-haired. So were the two coachmen.

"My Lady Princess," he replied. "You yourself travel thinly attended on your affairs. I might with reason be as curious as you are. Shall I be, or shall we both keep silence?"

The princess laughed. "Indeed, you play masterfully with words, and your judgement is sound. But at least climb into my carriage, and I can carry you some part of the way home. I am sure you can stand off any number of robbers, but what of rain?"

Indeed thunder was beginning to rumble in the west, and lightning flashes silhouetted the palace towers. A few cold drops were already spattering down on the dusty bricks of the road. Blade shrugged. Why not? The princess could not take him by surprise unless she was willing to try killing with her own hands. Everything Blade had heard of her suggested she preferred to use other people as her tools. Besides, he had found few chances to listen to the woman.

He climbed in and settled himself on the cushioned and brocaded seat behind her. The carriage moved off in the darkness. Blade relaxed as much as he could without moving his hand far from his sword hilt. The air in the carriage was heavy with Amadora's perfume. When he looked at her, it seemed that her eyes were glowing in the dark, like a cat's.

Moved by an impulse to test her, Blade reached out a hand and stroked her hair. She turned farther toward him, and he saw a flicker of white teeth in the darkness as she smiled. He half-expected her to speak, but she seemed to feel no need for words. One hand came up and stroked the side of his neck. The other took one of his own hands and lifted it to her lips. Her tongue flicked nimbly across the palm. Blade felt a warmth creeping into his groin. He could not have prevented it if he'd wanted to, and for the moment he didn't want to.

Amadora sighed, let go of his hand, and unfastened the brooch that held her cloak around her. It slid to the floor of the carriage, leaving her shoulders gleaming bare in the dim light from the carriage's lantern. A moment later she flowed up against Blade, and her lips were on his.

Amadora's kiss and Amadora's embrace would have aroused Blade if nothing else had. They would have aroused a stone statue. Every hour the princess had ever spent with any man had taught her something. Now she was using all those years of learning on Blade.

Her tongue was in his mouth, seeking out his tongue like some particularly nimble snake. Her hands fluttered up and down his body. The pattern might have seemed aimless, but to Blade her lightest and most random touch carried fire. He groaned and reached out for the princess. His hands stroked her throat and shoulders and crept across the upper slopes of her breasts. He stopped there for a moment, until he could be sure of not fumbling like a schoolboy. Then he began to slowly work the princess' brocade gown down off her shoulders. As it came, he bent his head forward and buried his lips in the scented valley between her breasts.

A moment later her own hands slipped inside his tunic and began to play on his bare skin. His own gasp echoed hers. The gown slipped down farther, and his lips closed on an exposed nipple. It was already jutting and hard as his lips began playing with it. His hand reached up to cup the other breast as it came free of the gown, and he caressed and stroked and plucked. Amadora's gasps turned to moans, and her own hands crept lower.

A sudden lurching of the carriage nearly broke Blade's grasp on the princess and threw him to the floor. They caught each other around the waists and held on, clasped together, until the lurching faded away. Amadora threw back her head and laughed long and exuberantly. She was half-hysterical with delight and passion.

Blade raised himself out of the seat until his head was bumping the roof of the carriage. His hands and Amadora's together struggled with the buckles and lacings of his trousers. Her hands tightened into claws as she hauled the trousers down, leaving Blade bare below the waist. Amadora's lips closed around his almost painful erection for a moment. Then she seemed to realize that Blade was already as prepared as any man could ever be. The last thing he needed was her lips working on him. Blade groaned with relief as those warm lips slipped away, and clutched at what was left of his self-control.

Then Amadora was struggling out of her gown, bracing herself against the side of the carriage. Under the gown she wore only a linen half-shift embroidered with gold thread. She jerked the shift up past her waist. She looked as if she was going to jerk it all the way off and be totally naked. But once again her enthusiasm took over. With the shift still wadded around her slim waist, she lowered herself onto Blade. He speared upward into her, and in a moment they were locked together as she twisted and writhed and he thrust furiously upward.

Amadora's breath came in sharp little moans now, and her teeth worried at Blade's ears like a dog on a choice bone. Her arms went around him and her hands locked together in the small of his back with more strength than he could have imagined in this elegant woman. Her warmth and wetness held him, drew him

in, were all around him, drove him steadily toward an explosion. Blade knew he had enormous endurance and he also knew this woman was going to test it thoroughly.

At last Amadora's head jerked back, and she caught hold of Blade's shoulders and pushed herself down on him harder than ever before. Blade felt as though she wanted to take all of him into herself, and didn't mind if she flattened him into the seat cushions in the process!

Instead her mouth opened and an animal-like howl came out of it. There was nothing human in that sound, only the exaltation of a female animal at last finding the release she sought desperately. Amadora's body arched like a bow strained almost to the breaking point, until her long hair hung down vertically in back and her breasts jutted almost straight upward. Her pelvis twisted in a furious, desperate circle.

That twisting was the end for Blade's self-control. His own body arched as his hips thrust upward. Amadora rose with them, until it seemed she was going to be pushed straight through the roof of the carriage. She hung there, legs and arms bracing her in place on Blade; while he writhed and heaved and poured himself up into her. Now it was his turn to let out the raw, jungle noises of something that wasn't quite human any more in the sheer fury of its passion.

For a long moment after he spent himself, Blade held Amadora aloft. Then he sagged downward into the cushions and she sagged down! on top of him. She folded forward onto him, her hair flowing down over his shoulders. Her ringed fingers played with the sweat-soaked hair on his chest, and she made little murmurs and chuckles like a well-fed baby. The howling, writhing female animal of just a few minutes ago was gone.

Blade had no doubt that would come again, at the right time and place. He couldn't help smiling as he thought of how this bout, at this time and place, must have sounded. But no doubt the coachmen, the outriders, and even passers-by were used to hearing the sounds of passion coming out of Princess Amadora's carriage.

Chapter 20

That was the first time Blade found himself making love to Princess Amadora. It wasn't the last. Over the next month or so the lady contrived half a dozen more occasions. They were all intended to look like accidents, but Blade wasn't fooled at all. The woman was testing him out as a lover. When she had done that she would start testing him out as a political ally. To replace Iscaros? Possibly. Certainly the count seemed more than usually worried about something, at the times Blade saw him.

Blade was very careful to play the naive, lustful barbarian, too blinded by Amadora's beauty and obvious passion for him to be suspicious of what she might have in mind. As long as he could do that, both he and Tera would be a good deal safer. If he could go on doing it long enough, he would probably learn a good deal of her plans.

And then what? It seemed to Blade that he had two choices. One was to act on his own, going straight to the Emperor. The other was to ally himself with Duke Pardes. Normally Blade wouldn't trust the eunuch as far as he could throw a war galley. But Pardes might consider anyone who helped him bring about Amadora's final downfall friendly, or at least valuable. He might also be willing to take Tera under his protection. Blade could not help thinking about what might happen to the girl after his return to Home Dimension. He knew he could not hope to stay in Karan much longer.

Amadora made her first move one night when the two of them were lying in her satin-sheeted bed, relaxing between two bouts of lovemaking. She traced circles on his stomach with one finger and

murmured, "Blade, what would you say to always having me around to love like this?"

"I'd say you were joking. You are a Princess of the Blood. I am merely a newly promoted general, my origins honorable but obscure. Would the Imperial House swallow this?"

"The Imperial House has swallowed many such things in the past, Blade. Blood far stranger and less honorable than yours has flowed in the veins of those who sat on the Coral Throne."

"Perhaps. But there is already a man who seems to care for you, and his origins are honorable and not at all obscure."

"Care for me? Iscaros?" The princess gave a short, harsh, ugly laugh. It would have fooled ears less experienced than Blade's. "Care for me? He wants a sheath for his sword and thinks he can perhaps stab his way to power with it. That is all." She bent over Blade until her hair flowed down across his face and her nipples brushed his chest. She was obviously ready again. Fortunately, so was Blade.

Things went on this way for quite a while. Autumn moved on toward winter and the warriors of Scador settled down in the occupied frontier land. They gorged on its crops, swilled down its wine, warmed their beds with its captured daughters and wives. Refugees from the frontier lands and from the Scadori raids farther into Karan crowded into the capital. They did not go hungry or homeless-Jores did his best to see to that. But their mood was ugly, and it grew uglier as they realized that the Emperor and his military advisers were holding back from anything that might free their homes and avenge their dead.

Amadora dropped only vague hints of what she had in mind. She was obviously being careful to say nothing that could serve as real evidence against her, just in case Blade did decide to carry tales to Pardes or the Emperor. Blade listened carefully, asked naive questions, and generally went on playing the lustful fool.

One thing was becoming more and more certain. Amadora was becoming dangerously fond of his company in bed. The danger there was not so much for him as for Tera. If the princess ever got the idea into her sleekly-groomed head that Tera was keeping Blade from doing his best-well, Blade did not like to think too much about what might happen.

Nothing did happen for a while. Amadora's lovemaking grew more and more furious and more and more demanding. At first Blade wondered if she was faking some or all of this lust, to test him. But it became more and more obvious that she wasn't faking at all. She was being driven onward by a genuine, uncontrollable passion for Blade, beyond anything that mere political ambitions could have done.

Blade knew that could make her even more dangerous. A jealous woman could fly into rages that a merely ambitious one could never match. She could also watch more closely for any sign of his losing interest. If she found any, Tera would be in immediate, deadly danger.

Blade did what he could. He threw all his skill, experience, and endurance into keeping Amadora satisfied to the point of exhaustion. He also continued to post half a dozen picked guards around Tera's chambers. He would have liked to put Captain Zogades in charge of them, to ensure their loyalty and vigilance. But that would have gone beyond the limits permitted to even the most trusted generals. In the past, generals' bodyguards had turned too successfully against too many Emperors. If Blade pushed beyond the permitted limits, he would have open enemies besides Count Iscaros. Even Jores himself might start having suspicions of Blade's loyalty.

Blade tried to keep as much of all this as possible from Tera, but she was too intelligent to miss it all. She

seemed quite unworried, though, and spent much of her time in the garden of their house, taking care of the flowers. After so many years on the grim bare plateau of Scador, she could not get enough of the colors and scents, particularly the roses. There weren't too many things in this Dimension that could always make Blade happy. But watching Tera moving like a woodland nymph among the flowers was one of them.

Even that reminded him of how sooner or later he would have to return to Home Dimension. When that happened, Tera would be not only vulnerable but grief-stricken. He couldn't do anything about the grief-she loved him too much. But he could try to do something about the vulnerability, and decided to go ahead on the matter. He arranged a confidential meeting with Baron Descares, Duke Pardes' scar-faced henchman and agent.

"Descares, there is my wife Tera."

"There is."

"I would have her protected, in case misfortune befalls me."

Descares smiled. "What misfortune can befall one so young and strong and so much in the Emperor's favor?"

Blade felt more than usually impatient with this sort of verbal fencing. But he knew he would weaken his position by not playing along.

"Fevers can strike down anyone. Or I could fall from a horse, like your master, and break my neck instead of merely a few bones. Or-need I list all the misfortunes that the gods may send?"

"No, I think that is not needed."

"Then you know that Tera may find herself alone. I would consider it valuable aid if I knew she would be protected in such a case."

"Indeed, that would be valuable aid. But how can I give it?"

"Your master Duke Pardes can give it with great ease, with his power and wealth. Is that not so?"

"It is. But he seldom gives aid to those who cannot aid him."

"In that he is wise. I would not do differently. But I do not see clearly how I could aid a man so powerful as Duke Pardes."

"Perhaps not. But perhaps..." Descares let his voice trail off and fingered his scars for a moment. Then:

"You are in the confidence of Princess Amadora, are you not?"

That struck Blade as an almost ridiculously delicate way of putting it. But since there seemed to be no secrecy left in the affair, he saw no reason not to admit it.

"I am."

"She occasionally speaks of her-ah, hopes-doesn't she?"

"She does."

"Could you speak of them to me?"

"Perhaps I could. But it would be hard for me to do so, unless I was sure that the princess would not know of it."

"My master's resources are, as you said, large. He can contrive to keep what he learns a secret. He can also contrive to keep even more secret the whereabouts of young women who have been entrusted to his protection."

"I am not surprised to learn this."

"Are you also glad?"

"I would say that I am."

That was as close to an open agreement as things like this ever got in Karan. For the moment Blade had a little peace of mind about Tera's future.

It was a week before he decided to mention his bargain to Tera. They were in the garden when he did so. Blade was sitting in a chair, sipping the last of the watered wine from breakfast, while she worked on the roses.

She listened to him, expressionless and silent until he had finished. Then she said only, "Did you need to make yourself Pardes' ally, even in secret?"

"He has already been an ally of ours in all but name for quite a while. He is the enemy of our enemy, or so they say."

"True." She gave a little snort of surprise and pain.

"What happened?"

"I pricked my thumb on a thorn."

"You should really wear gloves for that work. The gardener does."

"That gardener has no soul. He doesn't understand how good it feels to have the living plants against my skin. There was so little life up on the plateau, even when I thought I was among my people. Here there is so much--"

"Yes, and a lot of it reminds me of starving animals and poisonous snakes."

"Some of it. But there is you, and that is much." She laughed. "I just thought of something. I might be worried about what any other protector but Pardes would ask from me, if he did have to hide me. But there's one thing Pardes can't ask for-him or any other eunuch."

Blade laughed also. "I never thought of that, but you're right. Poor Pardes-to have such a jewel as you resting in the palm of his hand, and he can't really grasp it!"

Blade returned to the house well after dawn the next morning, after a night spent with a particularly demanding Princess Amadora. She seemed to glory in thinking up new and improbable things for them to do. It had been sheer luck that Blade's strength hadn't finally failed him.

A strange carriage was standing outside the house as he approached. Three of the household guards were standing beside it, grim-faced and keeping a close watch on the coachman. One of them came over to Blade.

"What's going on, soldier?"

"My lord, it-it is bad news."

"What-?" He broke off. There could be only one real answer to that question.

The soldier read Blade's expression and nodded. "The Lady Tera is sick. The doctor is with her now."

"How sick?"

"The doctor has not said, my lord. He asked us to send you in as soon as you returned. Also, the gardener has disappeared."

"The gardener? What-?" Blade cut himself off, realizing that he must be gaping like an idiot. He could ask questions after he saw the doctor-and Tera.

The doctor met him in the hall outside Tera's door, and drew him aside out into the garden. Blade recognized the man as one permitted to attend patients even in the Imperial Palace. That meant he was not only skilled in medicine, but equally skilled in keeping his mouth shut.

"Well?" said Blade.

The doctor could not keep from licking his lips and blinking several times.

"Doctor," said Blade. "I cannot read your mind. I think the news is bad, but I would rather have it. And I think you would rather give it than have your neck wrung."

The doctor nodded. "The Lady Tera is going to die. She has been poisoned, and the signs of the poison are unmistakable. It is the venom of a particular kind of fish that lives under the coral reefs in the south. Once it has entered the blood stream, there is no antidote that anyone has ever been able to discover." After a moment he added; "I think it was smeared on the rose bushes, by someone who knew the Lady Tera worked on them without gloves and would sooner or later prick herself."

It was a little while before Blade could speak. He wanted to say something more intelligent than, "You're sure?" or "That can't be!"

Finally he managed to say, "Can I see her?"

The doctor looked at him with genuine compassion. "You can. But I-I ask you to remember her as she was, before the poison. This poison-it kills cruelly. I would like to burn alive anybody who uses it!"

Blade nodded grimly. "I may be able to give you that chance, doctor. But first--" He turned and headed

for Tera's room.

Tera lay in bed, one arm red and swollen to three times its normal size. The hand was a mass of foul-smelling sores that dripped yellow matter into a basin. She writhed and tossed, screaming hoarsely from a raw throat as pains tore through her. Her face was flushed and burning from an impossibly high fever, and when she coughed, she coughed blood.

Somehow she had enough awareness left to recognize Blade, and reach out for him with her good hand. He took that hand, sat down on the rug beside the bed, and did not get up again until she died twelve hours later. By that time he knew what the doctor meant about remembering Tera as she had been. She was no longer a living and lovely girl, but the corpse of a woman who might have been a hundred years old. He continued to sit, holding the now stiff and lifeless hand, until the doctor and Zogades came in to lead him away and pour some wine into him.

Tera was dead, but she had died without feeling that he had betrayed her or stopped loving her. She had known that he loved her, as long as she was able to know anything.

Tera was dead, and now there was nothing and nobody to think about in this damned Dimension except himself. Now there was nothing to keep him from taking his sword and ramming a foot of it into Princess Amadora's stomach.

He knew that Amadora must have given some of the orders that led to Tera's tormented death. She would be the first to go. Count Iscaros had doubtless given other orders, and he would die next. Then there would be a reckoning with Descares. Perhaps the scar-faced warrior had given no orders. But it was hard to believe that his tongue had not wagged when it should have remained still. It must have been he who passed on the word of how much Blade cared for Tera and how much he was willing to do for her. Then Princess Amadora's jealousy and ambition would have done the rest.

If Blade had been thinking more clearly, he might have realized that his rage was exactly what Amadora and Iscaros had hoped to provoke. He would not have been surprised at the ambush that caught him on the road to her palace. Even though he was surprised, he still managed to lay about him well enough to leave nearly a dozen of the ambushers dead or hurt. But their numbers and their weighted nets eventually brought him down.

He was also surprised when they did not go ahead and kill him. But then as he lay on his back, his hands and feet bound, he saw Count Iscaros looking down at him. The count's face was split in a broad grin, and he almost glowed with the joy of a man who sees his enemy at his mercy and victory at hand.

Blade made a mental resolution that the first chance he had he would chop that grin right down the middle with a sword. That was all he had time to do before Iscaros stepped up and kicked him in the head.

Chapter 21

Blade wasn't surprised to awake chained hand and foot in a smelly, damp darkness. He was surprised to wake up at all. For some reason or other, his head was still on his shoulders. It ached abominably, but it was still there. How much longer it would stay there, Blade didn't know. But for the time being he was alive, and that was always more useful than being dead.

On that thought he went back to sleep.

The next time he awoke he realized that three things had changed. His head hurt a good deal less. The wooden surface under him was heaving slowly up and down and from side to side, creaking loudly as it did so. Somebody was standing over him, looking down at him.

Blade looked up at the somebody. There was enough light to make out a man clad in a loincloth, nearly as tall as Blade and a good deal wider. The man's black hair and beard were enormously long, thick, and tangled. The high cheekbones and arched nose showed Nessiri blood. The eyes that looked down at Blade showed a glint of amusement.

"Well, friend. So you are with us again?"

"I suppose you could say that," replied Blade cautiously.

"I just did. Welcome aboard the Green Gull."

So the movement and creaking was that of a ship at sea. "If you can call this a welcome." Blade made a gesture that took in the whole dismal hold.

The man threw back his head and roared with laughter until his massive paunch was shaking. Then he sobered abruptly. "I'd best not enjoy myself too much, or even Thickhead'll realize something's afoot."

"Thickhead?"

"Captain Gazes, if you're wanting to be formal."

Blade struggled into a more comfortable position. "All right. So now I know who Thickhead is. Who are you? What are you doing down here? And where are we going?"

The big man squatted down on his haunches and looked shrewdly at Blade. "What will you do to me if I don't say anything at all?"

"Pull that damned beard of yours out by the roots the first chance I get," snapped Blade. "That'll do for a start." He wondered if he could reach out a leg far enough to hook this clown's feet out from under him.

Instead of getting angry, the big Nessiri looked as though he was going to burst out laughing again. Then he sat down cross-legged on the deck and looked at Blade.

"Well. I can see you're a fighting man. That's what I suspected. Probably somebody pretty good, too, or they wouldn't have shaved your head to keep people from recognizing you. You're the first fighting man Green Gull's had on her slave deck since Thickhead started trusting me. That's good. You and me, together, maybe we can take this ship and do a little something with her. I know places where we can get a full crew of people who'd be glad to help us turn pirate."

For a moment Blade felt as though he had been hit on the head again. He had just been told he was imprisoned aboard Green Gull, probably a slave. Now he was being offered a chance to break out and turn pirate. What sort of lunatic was he dealing with here?

But the man sounded both sane and sincere, as far as Blade could tell. Certainly if the big Nessiri was offering him any kind of chance, it might not be a bad idea to take it. This wasn't Scador. He didn't have to worry about Tera any more. Here, what he needed to think about was avenging her.

Blade smiled. "You still haven't told me who and what you are," he said.

The big man nodded. "Name's Gursun. Nessiri, I suppose you've guessed. A warrior, once, but the Karani took me fifteen years ago. I've turned into a damned good slave, though. That's why Captain Thickhead trusts me, and why I've started thinking about taking the ship and turning pirate. I'm still young enough to die like a warrior, by all the gods!"

"What do I have to do with all this?"

"I figured quite some time back that with two really good fighters I could take the ship. There's only thirteen sailors besides Thickhead. Only five of them're much good in any sort of fight."

"You've seen them in action?" Blade didn't expect an answer to the question. What he wanted was to remind Gursun that he was an experienced fighter who wouldn't take anything on trust.

"Enough times to guess pretty good what they're like."

"All right. Go on."

Blade's suddenly starting to give orders didn't seem to bother Gursun. That was good. The man wasn't so mad or proud that there would be no way of getting along with him except doing what he said. Blade was perfectly willing to obey ten madmen, let alone one, if it would get him off this ship and back to where he could strike at Iscaros and Amadora. But he would much rather not have to.

He suddenly realized that he was horribly thirsty. "Before we go on---could I have some water?"

Gursun nodded, vanished briefly, and returned with a large clay jug. The water was cool and refreshing; it washed the sour dryness out of Blade's mouth and finished clearing up his head. When Blade had finished drinking, Gursun went on.

In a fight the other eight crewmen could be taken care of by releasing the other nine slaves aboard Green Guild. The nine didn't know much about fighting, but they did know a good deal about hating their masters.

Blade laughed. "So far so good." He held up his chained hands. "How are you going to get these off me?"

It seemed that Captain Gazes was fond of having Gursun wrestle other captain's slaves. Usually he won. Considering his barrel-like torso and tree-trunk arms and legs, that wasn't surprising. Gursun looked powerful enough to give even Duke Pardes a stiff fight.

"Fact is, I've won a good bit of money for old Thickhead, with bets and all. Hasn't given me a penny, but it's all there in his strongbox, I'm sure. I'm getting kind of a reputation, so the betting's falling off. But if there was another slave aboard, a real good fighter, he and I could put on shows. No betting, but Gazes could rake in some money letting people watch. It doesn't take much to tempt that greedy bastard."

"I see. He'll naturally have to unchain me and have us work out a few times to see what I'm like. One of those times-" Blade shrugged "-we move."

Gursun nodded. "Right. With luck, he'll have us do one or two rounds when we're well out to sea. That means we'll not be having any patrol ships butting in. We can slip the bodies over the side real quiet, and

then away we go."

Away you go, Blade thought. I won't be going with you, unless you're going back toward Iscaros and Amadora. If you try to keep me from going where I want, you're likely to go over the side yourself.

But that was something to worry about when and if the time came. For the moment, Gursun was a fairly good ally, and would have been so even if he hadn't also been the only one!

Gursun took Blade's silence for agreement, and vanished again. Blade spent some time testing the strength of his chains, discovering that he wasn't going to break free without help. Then he went back to sleep. He had always been able to sleep more or less at will. It was a handy gift when he could never be sure if he might need his full strength.

Gursun woke him up by putting another pot of water and a half-loaf of coarse black bread on the deck beside him. Then the Nessiri bent over and whispered in Blade's ear.

"We've got a problem, my friend."

"How so?"

"Thickhead says he's got orders to turn you over to some officer on the island of Skadros. He's not supposed to let you out of the chains until then." Gursun stood up and looked down at Blade for a moment. "I'm beginning to wonder if you might be somebody important. There's a certain general who's missing, they say. Used to be an Arena slave and then a Guardian. But he did something for the Boy Emperor and got promoted. Know anything about that?"

Blade shrugged. "Even if I did, why should I tell you? It won't make any difference why I'm here if I can't get out of these chains and fight. If I can, we can worry about other things later."

"You're talking sense," said Gursun. "But we've got a problem if Thickhead won't let you out. Skadros is only seven days away, so we've got to move fast. We may get only one chance."

Blade considered this. "Suppose you say I've insulted you in all sorts of unforgivable ways. You'd like to take me up on deck and pound some manners into me in front of the whole crew and the other slaves. You think I'm too damned proud, and all the rest. Of course, you'll be happy to wait until we're too far out to sea for me to swim ashore, but--"

Gursun choked back a laugh. "It might work. Thickhead doesn't like slaves with a mind of their own. He thinks I'm the kind of 'good' slave who agrees with him." Gursun spat into the bilge at the idea. "I'll give Thickhead the idea, and see what he thinks. Meanwhile I'll see about getting you regular food and water." He frowned. "You realize we're only likely to get one chance? You won't be having a chance to look the ship over beforehand."

"I know. But do you have a better idea?"

Gursun shook his head and vanished again.

Blade counted the days by Gursun's visits with bread and water. By the end of the fourth day he was beginning to get worried. Green Gull must be more than halfway to Skadros by now. Once there, the odds against his escaping would be much longer.

But on the morning of the fifth day, Gursun at last set Blade's mind to rest. "I've talked the old bastard around. You'll be brought up late this afternoon by some of the sailors."

"Should I jump them right off?"

Gursun shook his head. "Wait until we're together and can guard each other's backs. I'll give the signal. It's a piece of luck that we'll be doing it late in the afternoon. By the time we're finished it'll be getting dark. We can give any nosy bastards the slip in the night."

Blade relaxed as well as he could as the hours passed. Under him he could feel that Green Gull was rolling more than usual. Was the weather topside turning against them?

Blade wasn't worried about having to fight on a heaving ship's deck. He had done it before. But if the weather got too bad, Gazes would be having second thoughts about the fight.

So he was pleasantly surprised when three armed sailors came down into the hold. One stood back by the ladder with a loaded crossbow aimed at Blade. The other two silently unlocked his chains.

One of them drew a sword and prodded Blade to his feet. "Up on deck, you loudmouthed pig. Gursun's going to teach you some manners while we watch." Blade replied with a glare and a surly growl. "None of that, now!" snapped the sailor, jabbing the sword-point in deep enough to draw blood. Blade unfolded himself and strode toward the ladder, glowering at the sailors as he went.

On deck he was not surprised to see that the wind had risen and the sky turned gray. Green Gull was slogging her way across an ocean flecked with whitecaps. Spray was coming in over the bow, and the deck amidships was already slick and wet.

Twelve of the sailors and all of the slaves were already on deck. Blade mentally noted their positions. Good. Three of the sailors were manning the helm, which would keep them out of action until it was too late. Captain Gazes himself was standing within easy range of where Blade and Gursun were going to be fighting.

Gursun stepped forward, his face twisted up in a dramatic glare as he looked at Blade. He stepped up to Blade, spat on the deck at his feet, then slapped him twice, hard enough to sting. Blade fixed his eyes on Gursun and spat in his turn.

"Your mother slept with dogs and swine," he growled, loud enough to be heard above the wind and sea.

"Can you fight with anything except your mouth, you son of a poxed bitch?"

Blade danced back from Gursun, then pivoted and aimed a blow at the Nessir's shoulder. The other man spun in turn, catching the blow on his upper arm and riding with it. He continued the turn and came out of it into a kick aimed at Blade's groin. It was Blade's turn to swing aside, catching the oncoming foot on his hip.

They'd agreed to fight just long enough to warm up properly. That took less than five minutes. By that time both Blade and Gursun had a few bruises, but neither felt at all tired or slowed down. Looking around, they saw that everyone was too busy wondering what would happen next to be thinking of anything else.

They would never have a better chance. Their eyes met, and they moved toward each other, grappled,

and swung each other around. They grunted and groaned and swore at each other like a couple of Home Dimension wrestlers hamming it up for the TV cameras.

Then Gursun squeezed Blade's arm, and pushed him away hard. Blade reeled backward, straight at Captain Gazes. Gazes cursed and leaped to one side. He was not fast enough to get out of Blade's range. As Blade passed, he chopped sideways and down with the edge of his right hand. He struck Gazes in the neck. The captain staggered, but he couldn't do anything else before Blade hooked his feet out from under him. Gazes crashed to the deck, and Blade stamped one foot down hard on his chest. Blood sprayed over the deck and Blade's legs as Gazes' ribs caved in.

Two sailors beyond the captain were the first to recover from their surprise. They charged Blade, swords drawn. Gursun dashed in, caught one sailor by his pigtail, jerked him within reach, and clamped both huge hands on the man's neck. Blade sidestepped the other sailor's rush, caught him by the waist and one arm, and wheeled around. The crossbow went spung, but the bolt sank into the chest of the sailor Blade was using as a shield. Blade dropped the body and snatched up the man's sword. He tossed it into the air, caught it by the point, estimated its balance, and threw it. Like a spear it whistled through the air, and like a spear it caught the crossbowman in the stomach. The man stood there for a moment, looking down in stunned and painful surprise at the sword buried up to its hilt in his stomach. Then he screamed, staggered back against the railing, and let go of the crossbow. It vanished over the side, and the splash was lost in the sounds of wind and sea.

Gursun finished strangling his man, grabbed his sword, and threw the body at three other sailors. One of them went down, and Gursun waded into the other two. He kept them off Blade long enough for the Englishman to kneel and collect a sword and a bunch of keys from Gazes' body. He threw the keys to the chained line of slaves, shifted the sword to his right hand, and sprang to his feet.

A sailor rushed in with a spear aimed at Blade. He chopped down at the shaft with his sword, cutting off a foot of the spear and several fingers of the sailor. Before the man could even open his mouth to scream, Blade swung the sword in an overhead arc. It split the sailor's skull down the middle and he was dead before he started to sag to the deck. As he went down, Blade jerked his sword free and waded into the battle beside Gursun.

To the sailors of Green Gull it must have seemed as if two monsters from the depths of the sea were loose on their decks. The two roared and bellowed curses and war-cries. They slashed and thrust with their swords, lopping off arms and legs and heads, chopping open chests and bellies and heads. Blood flowed back and forth across the deck now as the ship rolled. There seemed to be no way to attack the two mad giants. Those who tried died at once. Those who tried to flee died a little later.

Then the slaves who had now unlocked themselves joined the fight. They snatched up fallen swords, spears, and used their chains and their bare hands if they couldn't find a weapon. At that, the last courage left the sailors who were still resisting. Two of them died under the slaves' charge, beaten and kicked and stamped and stabbed until they looked like bloody sides of meat rather than anything human. The other two sprang onto the railing and hurled themselves over the side. Even death in the sea seemed better than what awaited them on the decks of what had been until a few minutes ago their own ship.

The three sailors manning the helm were still manning it. But their faces had turned the color of the whitecaps and they had drawn their swords. Blade waved his own bloody sword in the direction of the helmsmen and shouted to them.

"Surrender-now! We've got the ship and we can come up and get you if we want to. But maybe you're worth saving, if you behave right!"

Gursun caught Blade's arm and whispered fiercely in his ear. "What in the-? We don't want to leave one of those lice alive if we can--"

"Yes we do," said Blade in a low, firm voice. "I know ships just as well as you do. We're going to have a tricky time getting this ship back to land in this weather even with them to help us."

"But---"

"Look, I didn't go in with you on this to drown in a shipwreck just a few hours later. Those sailors know the situation too. They know that if they play any games they'll drown if we don't cut their throats first. We can trust them as long as we need to, I think."

"And afterwards?"

"Afterwards we can do anything we want with them," said Blade. "But not now."

Gursun shrugged. "All right. I'd almost rather risk shipwreck than leave anyone alive who could talk about what we've done. But you're right. They won't find anyone to talk to until we're safe on shore. By then I don't imagine they'll be in too good shape to talk." He drew his hand across his throat in a slitting gesture.

Gursun cupped his hands and roared at the three helmsmen. "All right. You can live! Now-drop those swords and stay where you are until we tell you differently. You've got until I count five. One, two, three, f--"

Two swords clattered to the deck and one flew over the side. One of the helmsmen sagged to the deck, half-fainting with relief. Gursun strode across to the quarterdeck ladder and scrambled up beside the three white-faced men. He was brandishing his own sword ferociously.

"Now! Get ready to come about. We're going to head for shelter, and you're coming with us!" He turned to the six bloodstained slaves who were still on their feet. "Bend on to the mainsail halyard, you clowns! You're free now, but by the gods we've got a bit of sailing to do!"

Gursun's bull-roars seemed to shock the slaves out of their paralysis. Like arthritic old men they moved slowly across the bloody and body-strewn deck to the rope Gursun indicated. Hands trembling with excitement gripped it, and wide, unbelieving eyes turned toward Gursun for the next order.

In spite of unwilling or unskilled help, Gursun brought the ship about safely. Blade stayed on deck until Green Gull steadied on her new course, in case an extra pair of hands were needed after all. Then he went below, to search the late Captain Gazes' cabin and belongings.

Blade had to take Gazes' cabin apart almost piece by piece and splinter by splinter, with an axe, a crowbar, a hammer, and his bare hands. He worked up a sweat, he strained muscles, he bruised fingers and toes, he worked splinters of wood into feet and knees and had to work them out with a knife blade sterilized over a candle flame. But it was all worth it and ten times more.

He found Gazes' private hoard of gold and silver, almost enough to buy Green Gull all over again. He found the lists of the cargo for this voyage, a cargo that included over a hundred sets of weapons and armor for the soldiers of the garrison of Skadros. He found a copper tube, with lead seals at each end bearing the arms of Count Iscaros. He found a letter from Iscaros to Captain Gazes, telling him to turn

over without fail the sealed tube and Special Prisoner 8 to Baron Descares on Skadros.

When Blade chopped open the sealed tube, he found another letter. This one was from Princess Amadora to Descares, giving him instructions about keeping the Lord Blade safely confined. It seemed that Blade was to be kept carefully hidden on Skadros until the proper moment. That proper moment would come when Amadora thought the Emperor Jores might be willing to dismiss Duke Pardes in return for Blade's safety.

Of course the Emperor might not be willing to make such a bargain. In which case Blade could be disposed of at Descares' leisure, in any way that guaranteed his body would never be found and his disappearance would remain a mystery forever.

They could hear Blade's laughter all over the ship when he finished reading the letter. It was a magnificent irony. If Amadora and Iscaros had simply slit his throat and dropped him in the nearest river, they could have been safe. Dead men wreak no vengeance and mysteriously vanished ones inspire few avengers.

But they were too sophisticated for that. They wanted Blade alive, for the time being at least, to be a piece in their deadly games once more. So they put him aboard a ship, the same ship that carried messages enough to be their own death warrants if discovered. Now the ship was in Blade's hands and so were the messages. The arch-intriguers had intrigued once too often, and intrigued themselves right into Blade's hands.

Chapter 22

Blade waited until the ship dropped anchor for the night in the lee of a small island before talking with Gursun. He started off by revealing his true identity. As he had expected, this was no great surprise to the Nessiri warrior. "But if you help me, there will be a nasty surprise for Amadora and Iscaros."

Gursun spread his massive hands. "Without your aid I would still be a slave. You may ask of me anything that the gods of my people do not forbid."

"Good. Then I ask that you and the other slaves help me bring this ship to where I can take this message to Duke Pardes. What say you to that?"

"You think he will reward you?"

"Reward us, my friend. I will tell him only the truth, that without you I would be a captive on Skadros and he would be ignorant of the plots. Even the best spy nets can fail. Even if we only confirm what he already knows, that will be taken as a gesture of friendship. He will know for certain that I am on his side, and should be willing to reward me and my friends."

Gursun pulled at his beard. "Maybe. But what if his reward is a spear in the belly?"

Blade had to admit that Gursun's suspicions made too much sense, considering how things usually went in the Empire of Karan. But-

"If you are with me when I speak to Pardes, he won't live long enough to enjoy his treachery."

"I should put my head down on the block beside yours?"

"It will help."

"It may. But..." The Nessiri's voice trailed off and he appeared to be thinking hard. Then he pulled at his beard again.

"Blade, Karan's got a lot of Nessiri slaves and their women and children. You know that, don't you?"

"I do."

"I think, maybe, some of them would like to fight the Scadori. We've been fighting them nearly as long as you Karani. There's a lot who were warriors among the slaves, too, so we could fight well. Some of them were even horsemen. Karan needs horsemen, doesn't it?"

"It does." Blade waited for Gursun to continue, but the Nessiri seemed to be finished. Blade waited a little longer, then spoke briskly.

"Let's speak plainly, Gursun, not like a couple of Karani nobles planning an assassination. If the Nessiri slaves in Karan are offered their freedom, they'll take up arms against the Scadori. Is that what you're saying?"

"Yes."

"So what do you want of me in this matter?"

"What I want-what I want's that you talk to Pardes about this, and the Emperor too. Tell them what I've told you. Tell them I'll lead the other Nessiri, and they'll follow me. I'll swear to lay down my own life before I'll let a single Nessiri turn against Karan, swear it by anything they want to hear. Blade, you were a slave too. Think-think back to what it's like. You must---"

Blade held up a hand to stop Gursun's flow of words. "I must not do anything you ask me to, at least not just at your bidding. Particularly not when Pardes and the Emperor might think I've gone mad." He frowned at Gursun. "Why don't you simply raise the Nessiri slaves in revolt against the Empire? That way they won't have to fight for Karan, only for themselves. They'll never have a better chance, either, with the Scadori holding the frontier and the army weakened and scattered."

Gursun staggered as if Blade had struck him. Then he let out a wordless growl. Blade braced himself. He wasn't sure that the Nessiri wasn't going to leap at his throat right then and there.

Gursun's brief rage passed swiftly. He drank a cup of wine and wiped the sweat off his face. Then he went on.

"Blade, I-I nearly killed you there, for saying that Nessiri might ever do something that would help those dirty swine of Scador. Most of the warriors of my people would have killed you. For all our sakes, believe me. Believe what I say, and speak to the Emperor for my people. Promise me that. Otherwise I cannot go with you. I will turn pirate as I had planned, and let you and Karan go anywhere you want."

"You cannot force me to come with you, Gursun, so do not threaten me. Unless you wish to try killing me here, yourself." Again Blade braced himself. He did not care to mention that he would be hard put to reach Pardes or the Emperor without Gursun's aid.

Gursun's massive shoulders slumped, and he spread out his hands in a pleading gesture. "You think I'd

kill a comrade like you? How could I do that, in honor? Please, Blade." He looked ready to burst into tears of frustration over his lost hope of trying to free his people.

Blade now believed Gursun's sincerity. He wasn't sure if the plan would work, even if the Emperor and Pardes accepted it. He was even less sure they'd accept it. He wasn't sure, in fact, that he wouldn't be killed on the spot for even raising the question. Fear of slave revolts ran deep in Karan.

But Gursun and the Nessiri deserved his aid. He owed Gursun his freedom and whatever chance he had of avenging Tera. It was only fair to help in turn. Besides, a man who could think as much as Gursun did about the rest of his captive people was worth helping. Until now, Blade had met only one really good person in this whole blasted Dimension, and she was dead. Gursun seemed like he might be another, for all his growling and grumbling.

Blade thrust out his hand and gripped the Nessiri's. "Very well, Gursun. I believe you mean what you say. You shall help me reach Pardes and the Emperor. Then I shall speak for you and your people to them. If they attempt any treachery, you and I will have our final battle side by side. Is that enough?"

Gursun embraced Blade, squeezing him until Blade was ready to gasp for breath. Apparently this was enough.

On the voyage home the weather was gray and stormy, with half a gale blowing most of the time. With a small and inexperienced crew neither Blade nor Gursun got much sleep or peace of mind. Fortunately the same gray weather that gave them both gray hairs also kept patrol ships at a safe distance. They had four days' unmolested voyaging, then anchored safely in a small bay about thirty miles south of Karanopolis. From the map, they were about eight miles by road from Pardes' country estate.

Unfortunately it was not a simple case of getting ashore and walking off to their goal. The first and easiest thing to get was disguises.

"What sort of man can tramp around the countryside these days with no questions asked?" said Blade. "Soldiers, of course. So we all put on armor and weapons from the cargo, and there we are, a patrol of the good soldiers of His Sacred Majesty Jores VII."

Gursun laughed. "What about the three sailors?" He made his usual throat-slitting gesture.

Blade shook his head. "We'll strip and bind them like slaves captured while escaping. That can be our business if we need to answer questions. We're returning three escaped slaves to the estate of Duke Pardes."

Gursun shook his head. "Blade, you sure you hate the Karani as much as you say? You play tricks just like they do, and just as good."

Blade grimaced. "I knew a great deal about intrigues before I came to Karan. I didn't much like them then. I don't like them now. I wouldn't go on with them to sit on the Coral Throne itself, if I didn't have to."

When they had ferried the freed slaves and the captive crewmen ashore, Blade and Gursun set Green Gull's mainsail. Then they set her on course out of the bay toward the open sea and lashed her steering oar in place. They watched Green Gull sail out into the darkness, then rowed ashore.

The shore was not well-patrolled these days, since it was not from the sea that Karan was in danger. But

they ran into their first patrol of soldiers before they had covered three miles.

Blade stepped forward at "Who goes there?" and faced the eleven soldiers who blocked the road.

"We are of the household of Duke Pardes. We return from the shore with three slaves of his."

The sergeant commanding the patrol grunted in disgust. "Lots of those bastards think this is the time to make a run for it. Good work you caught them this close to home. All right, pass on."

They passed on, and passed through two more patrols without incident. Dawn was in the sky before they reached Pardes' estate. Blade hoped the household guards would not look too closely at the new arrivals before sending them on to the duke. By daylight the ex-slaves looked a good deal less like soldiers and the sailors less like slaves than they had by night.

He also hoped that Pardes himself was still at his country estate and that Descares was not. If Pardes had already returned to Karanopolis, all they had done might still be in vain and all they had hoped for lost forever. They had very little hope of making their way through the Golden City to Pardes' palace.

The estate was built around two courtyards. An outer one held the guardhouses, kitchens, storerooms, and the rest. The inner one held Pardes' own apartments and gardens.

To get into the outer courtyard was simple. Once again their story about returning some escaped slaves was enough. In a household the size of Pardes', it was hardly to be expected that every guard would recognize every house or field slave.

In the outer courtyard, Blade could see that Gursun was getting nervous. He himself was more tense than he would have liked to admit. At least they were past the stronger gate. The outer gate was massive timbers and iron hinges, a foot thick and twenty feet high. The inner gate was delicate, gilded iron latticework, more ornamental than protective.

While Gursun kept an eye on the rest of the party, Blade went over to the four guards at the inner gate. Under his cloak he had the message tube, lashed to his sword belt.

"I bring a message for the eyes of Duke Pardes," he said.

The senior guard looked coldly at him. "Duke Pardes never receives messages before breakfast. He will receive you in an hour."

Blade shook his head. They could not afford to wait around in the courtyard for even half that time. Someone was certain to notice something peculiar about either the "soldiers" or the "slaves."

"Minutes may count, my friend. I do not think Pardes will be grateful to you if he learns you have delayed this message. Do you know what his ingratitude can mean?"

The guard obviously did. His face paled slightly, and he licked his lips. But he also held his ground. "Sir, I can't let you in. I just-no, wait a minute. If I call the duty officer, maybe he can go in and persuade Pardes to see you. Will that do?"

"If you stop talking and do it quickly, yes."

The guard dashed off as if wolves were chasing him and vanished into one of the guardhouses. Blade

leaned against the wall, trying to look as relaxed and casual as possible. He watched three slaves push a large silver-decorated cart with four jewel-studded wheels out of the cookhouse. On top of the cart was an array of silver dishes.

"What's that?" Blade asked, pointing.

"His Grace's breakfast," replied one of the guards. It was hardly surprising that Pardes' massive frame required an equally massive amount of food. Still, the size of that breakfast was slightly awe-inspiring.

Then Blade froze. Coming out of the guardhouse was the guard who had gone off to get the duty officer. Behind him followed a fast-striding, erect figure, with an entirely too familiar scarred face.

Descares.

Blade instinctively stepped away from the wall and dropped into fighting stance, one hand near the hilt of his sword. The motion drew Descares' eye. He turned, then also froze.

"Blade!" he roared.

"Gursun! To me!" Blade thundered, even louder. The big Nessiri spun around, drew his sword, and dashed toward Blade. At the same time the slaves pushing the breakfast cart broke into a run, panicked by the sudden shouts. They dashed across the courtyard, forcing Descares to jump aside.

Blade shouted to Gursun again. "Quick! Grab that cart!" Gursun made a furious lunge, knocked two of the slaves aside, and grabbed the handles of the cart. Blade broke away from the stunned guards at the inner gate, knocking one of them flat, and ran up to the cart. He tried to pry the last slave loose, but the man's terror was freezing his grip on the cart. Blade drew his sword.

"Quick! Which way to Duke Pardes' apartment?"

"T-t-throoo t'gate and t'ird door t'left, m-m-m-master. D-don't kill-"

"Hang on and we won't!" Blade nodded to Gursun and the two big men shoved hard on the cart. It went rumbling across the courtyard, heading straight for the gate.

Descares was screaming, "Guards! Guards! Assassins! Stop them! Stop-!" as he leaped wildly aside again to keep from being flattened on the tiles of the courtyard. Blade and Gursun ducked as one of the gate guards threw a spear. It struck one of the silver dishes and knocked the lid off, sending a roasted chicken tumbling to the ground. Then the massive cart crashed into the inner gate with all the speed and power that Blade and Gursun together could give it. Gilt ornaments, ironwork, dishes, cups, and silverware flew in all directions. The gate flew open; the slave screamed and leaped down from the cart, then ran for his life. Blade and Gursun vaulted over the twisted remains of the cart and plunged through the open gate. Descares was only yards behind them, shrieking incoherently and waving a snatched-up spear in each hand.

The two men headed to the right and began to run, feet crunching on the gravel walks of the garden, vaulting bushes, zig-zagging like foxes with the hounds after them. Blade wasn't sure they would be able to make it to cover in time, but kept on running.

Then a massive figure loomed out of the shadows under the gallery ahead. Pardes wore a white robe, and walked slowly and carefully, using his massive club now as a walking stick. His appearance drew

another yell from Descares.

"Lord! Assassins! Hide yourself!" He raised his arm and hurled one of his spears. But his targets were moving too fast and his aim was too uncertain. The spear came nowhere near either Blade or Gursun. It soared through the air and instead cracked into a marble pillar beside Pardes, only a foot above his head.

Pardes jumped a foot into the air and let out a bellow of fury that echoed around the courtyard. "I thought you were against me, Descares! Now I know! Guards, seize Descares for treason! NOW!"

Descares stopped as if he had run into a brick wall, and the other guards did the same. But Pardes' roar paralyzed them so thoroughly they couldn't move to obey his orders. Descares screamed hysterically, ran a few feet toward Pardes, and threw his other spear. No one could doubt that this one was aimed straight at Pardes.

But it never reached him. As it whistled across the grass, suddenly Gursun was there in its path. Perhaps the Nessiri intended to catch it in mid-air. Instead it drove into his stomach, so hard that the point drove out through his back. It gleamed in the sunlight, wet with Gursun's blood.

For a moment, it seemed that everyone was totally paralyzed. Pardes stood, mouth and eyes open with surprise and rage. Gursun stood, the spear jutting out of him, shock glazing his expression. Blade stood, eyes focusing on Descares. The soldiers just stood, completely at a loss for what to do.

Then movement began again. Gursun gave a choked cry and fell with a thud to the ground, his face twisted in pain. Pardes moved forward, looking as formidable as a charging elephant. Descares' eyes flickered wildly about him as he looked for some place to run or hide. He was still looking when Blade walked up to him and put both hands around his throat.

After that there was quite a long time when Blade didn't know what was going on. The first thing he knew clearly was Pardes' voice sounding behind him as he pounded Descares' head on the ground.

"Blade?"

Blade looked at the bloody thing Descares had become, wiped his hands on the grass, and stood up.

"Yes, sir?"

"Perhaps you would tell me how you-let us say, how you managed to rise from the dead. And also other things." He turned and led Blade toward the privacy of his own rooms.

Chapter 23

Pardes read the message and listened to Blade in silence. After that he was quite willing to forgive Blade for disrupting his breakfast, breaking down his gate, and strewing his garden with bodies. He would have liked to hear more details, but Blade cut him off.

"Sir, I will talk more later. But for now there is Gursun. Without him I would not be here. He is certainly dying, and I can at least give him the comfort of my being there, if nothing else." Pardes nodded and Blade hurried away.

Blade arrived while Gursun was still conscious. He had refused any drugs because he wanted to be awake to talk to Blade. His face was ashy and his lip bled where he had bitten it because of the pain. He

gripped Blade's outstretched hand so hard that Blade thought the fingers would snap. "Blade-your promise-for the Nessiri slaves-remember-remember."

Then the doctors scurried around, to fill Gursun with drugs so that he could at least die peacefully. Three hours later he was gone, and after that Blade was able to give Pardes a more detailed version of his recent adventures. He also gave him Gursun's request.

Pardes leaned back in his massive chair of state and threw the last chicken bone from his second breakfast into a silver basin, washed his hands with scented water, and sat up.

"Iscaros and Amadora will not live more hours than there are fingers on this hand," he said, raising his left hand. "Those who wish to complain of this haste and immoderation can complain afterward. I am sure that Sores will not be among them, in any case."

"I doubt it," said Blade.

"It is because of you and Gursun that this will be so. It is because of Gursun that I will live to carry it out." He sipped at spiced wine. "If he had lived, I should perhaps have rewarded him, and him alone. But he no longer lives to be rewarded. I would not wish to leave his memory with no proper monument, so I think I shall do as he asked. The estates of Iscaros and Amadora are both large, and all of this will be forfeit to the Coral Throne. I think there will be enough gold to purchase with ease the freedom of all the Nessiri slaves and still leave some for the Imperial treasury."

"Not to mention some for you," said Blade. Exhaustion and bitterness made him careless in his choice of words.

"You think that?" said Pardes, quietly.

"I do. I have seen much in Karan, and liked very little of it."

"It does not matter now whether or not you were right then," said Pardes. "But I say to you now that you are wrong. For the moment the intrigues of Karan are a thing of the past. We must stand together to save the Empire from the Scadori."

"Yes, I suppose you can afford to think that way, now that you are on top," said Blade.

Pardes shrugged. "Perhaps you are right. Perhaps I would not be so willing for there to be peace if my foremost enemies were not defeated and doomed. I do not know, and I doubt if even the gods do. But it does not matter. What does matter is that I see as clearly as you do that this is a moment of deadly danger. I see as clearly as you do that we must fight the Scadori, not each other. I swear to you that your comrade Gursun died not to give me power, but for the safety of Karan and all who live in it. I will swear this in any temple, by any god that you care to name. I will swear it, because there must be trust between us if we are to do our best for Karan."

Blade did not ask for any oaths. To his own surprise, he realized that the big eunuch was probably telling the truth.

Iscaros and Amadora must have been dead nearly as quickly as Pardes promised. Galloping messengers brought their heads back to the duke before nightfall. Blade stood looking down at the two bloody heads in their wicker baskets.

"I don't mind admitting I would have liked to see them die," he said. "I owed them a personal vengeance."

"I am genuinely sorry, Blade," said Pardes. "But there was not time to send you secretly into Karanopolis. We had to strike, and strike fast, making a quick end of them: It was not making a quick end of you that brought them here, after all." Again, Blade had to admit Pardes was right. But he would still have preferred a personal vengeance.

Pardes and Blade set out for Karanopolis with the two heads. A strong escort went with them. Pardes was taking no chances on some frantic partisan of his victims trying for a final, desperate act of vengeance.

Jores VII listened calmly to Pardes' and Blade's tales of recent events. He winced when they came to the summary execution of Iscaros and Amadora, then shrugged and let the story run to its close.

He frowned when they had finished. "We cannot doubt that what was done was absolutely necessary. So We can only say that We wish it had not been necessary."

"A vain wish, considering Princess Amadora's ambitions."

Jores' frown deepened. "Pardes, you somewhat presume by interrupting Us." The eunuch shot a surprised glance at Jores, then looked at Blade. Blade grinned back. Pardes was going to have problems, dealing with the new, more decisive and confident Emperor.

"In any case," Jores went on, "what has been done could not be undone even if We wished it. It will benefit no one except the Scadori to argue the point further. But We bid you consider this, Pardes. What you have done reveals that you are as ambitious in your way as Amadora and Iscaros were in theirs. We have suspected it. Now We know it, and will not forget it."

Pardes' surprise showed plainly on his face. "Your Majesty, do you suspect me of seeking the Coral Throne? You know the law would forbid me, even if my own honor did not."

"Pardes, your honor is a slender reed upon which to prop the Coral Throne. We would not do so if you were not a eunuch. But the law does indeed forbid a eunuch to sit upon the Coral Throne. It does not keep a eunuch from seeking all power other than that, so that the Emperor is but his puppet. Nor does it keep him from seeking a more pliable Emperor if the first one refuses to play his game."

"Your Majesty seems to doubt me beyond all measure. If you wish my office or even my life--"

Jores raised a commanding hand. "We wish neither. We wish your best service during the time of danger from the Scadori. After that We wish your loyalty."

"You shall have both, Your Majesty."

"We doubt We shall have your loyalty unless a close watch is kept on you, Pardes. You are too old a dog to learn new tricks and become a faithful watchdog." Jores rose. "We shall wish to speak with both of you at a later time." He made a dismissing gesture with both hands, turned his back, and strode away.

Outside in the corridor Blade turned to Pardes. "You look like you were just hit on the head with an axe," he said with a laugh. "What did you expect? That we would all three fall on each other's necks like long-lost brothers?"

Pardes shook his head angrily. "Not that, Blade. Do not insult me by thinking me that kind of fool. It is just that I find it hard to realize that Jores has become-what-"

"An Emperor," said Blade quietly.

Within a week patrols were probing Scadori territory, while relays of fast-galloping messengers brought their reports to Blade and Pardes. Meanwhile, Blade and Pardes were working hard at mobilizing citizens, and freeing Nessiri slaves and anyone else who wanted to fight. Many of the refugees from the frontier lands came in with their own weapons. The Nessiri slaves had to be freed, armed, and organized, given leaders and training. As the work piled up, Blade would have given a great deal to have Gursun alive again, or be twins himself.

"Thank all the gods you're not," said Pardes to that. "Jores and I might be able to manage with one of you in Karan. In fact, we'll have to. But two of you?" He threw up his hands in mock despair.

In the middle of all the work, Blade found time to commission the Emperor's personal sculptor to carve tombs for Gursun and Tera. He could at least do this to make sure that his Nessiri comrade and his Scadori wife were not entirely forgotten in Karan.

Jores elevated Blade to a dukedom, and presented him with the most dazzling suit of armor Blade had ever seen. It was gilded all over, and studded with jewels and silver inlay work. Fortunately it was also robust and well-designed. Otherwise Blade would have declined Jores' admonition to "wear it when you lead against the Scadori." He was not going into a pitched battle in junk armor to please six Emperors!

The agreed-on master strategy was simple. A solid mass of infantry would swing around the Scadori northern flank and move to the Pass of Scador. That force would have to go on foot, since there would be no fodder to support a mounted army along that route. They would block the Scadori line of retreat.

Then the main army would march straight into the Scadori-held territory. It would have more regiments of Imperial infantry, all the freed slaves and volunteer recruits, and most of the cavalry. If the enemy did not assemble, they would be destroyed piece by piece. If they did assemble, the main army would engage them while the other came up from their rear. If they retreated, they would find the pass blocked and end up caught between the two armies.

It was so simple and foolproof a plan that Blade was quite certain something would go badly wrong. He could hardly believe that this whole confused and grim trip into Dimension X could end so simply.

The days moved on into winter, and the flanking force of infantry marched off toward the northwest. With the rivers frozen they had a long chilly walk before they were in position. Blade stood in the cold to watch the column move out of sight, then returned to his own work.

More days. Then just before sunset one evening a messenger on a half-dead horse came thundering up to the palace. Bloodstained bandages were around his head and one arm. Sheer panic distorted his voice as he stammered out his report.

The Scadori had massed and were on the march. They were headed east, straight for Karanopolis, brushing aside patrols and devastating the countryside as they came. At the rate they were moving, they would be under the walls of the city in barely ten days.

What about the flanking force of infantry? The first messenger didn't know anything about them. Before

the night was over a second messenger came in with the answer to that question.

The flanking force had lost a large part of its strength in a surprise attack as it moved around the Scadori flank. The commander promptly entered the nearest town with the survivors and started fortifying it. Now there was no hope of the infantry catching up with the Scadori before they reached Karanopolis.

Jores cursed when he heard that news. "I knew I should have sent either you or Pardes to command that force," he told Blade. "What General Tharsos has done will cost him his head, but it may cost Karan a great deal more."

Blade nodded grimly. The original neat plan of campaign lay in shattered pieces around them. In fact the situation was more dangerous than ever before. "If the Scadori do appear before the walls, there will be panic in the city. In that case I would not give much for the chances of the Coral Throne."

"Perhaps," said Jores. "But let's see what we can do to prevent that situation from coming to pass."

Blade shrugged. "There's only one thing we can do, Your Majesty."

"What's that?"

"March out, with what we have available here, and meet the Scadori in the field."

"Risk Karan on the outcome of one battle?"

"Yes."

"I wish-but no, even an Emperor's wishes will do no good here." Jores slapped the hilt of his sword. "This is all that can save us now. You are right, Blade. We shall march."

Chapter 24

Richard Blade sat on his horse in his gilded armor, the red cloak of a general of the Empire whipping around his shoulders in the cold wind. It blew straight from the west, and carried with it the sounds of the advancing Scadori army.

From the top of the ridge, Blade could see the enemy spread out across several miles of countryside. It was not just the warriors of Scador, either. Before the snows closed the pass, the women and children and slaves had come down from the plateau to join their men in Karan. Now they sat in the circles of tents and captured wagons behind the battle line, waiting for the outcome of the day's fighting.

If the day's fighting went against the Scadori, it would mean the end of their whole people, not just their army. If the day's fighting went against the Karani-well, there was nothing in the field between here and the walls of Karanopolis, and precious little to hold the walls if the enemy got that far.

Blade looked behind him at the Karani army taking position to his right and rear. There were three solid masses of Imperial infantry in that battle line, one in the center and one at each flank, about five thousand of them. Behind the center stood the cavalry, including the last Regiment of the Guardians of the Coral Throne. But the rest of the infantry were hastily mobilized and even more hastily trained volunteers of one sort or another. The rest of the cavalry were either volunteers or Nessiri slaves who hoped to kill Scadori and win their freedom today.

The grand total was perhaps twenty-five thousand. It was an army that might fight valiantly. It might also fall apart at the first collision with the enemy, and it certainly could not maneuver well.

Fortunately Blade and Pardes had brought their army to within sight of the enemy, and the Scadori would do the rest. They could not resist the temptation to strike at an enemy offering himself. Over there they would see only that one good blow could give them Karan and final victory over their ancient enemies.

Blade hoped his own army saw that as clearly. But even if they did, it could hardly make up for their lack of training. Well, he had done all he could. Time to take his bodyguard and put himself in position, preferably well forward. This was an army that would like to see its generals getting shot at.

The battle started even before Blade could get into position. The Scadori charged in the center, a solid column of them with their improvised cavalry protecting either flank. Blade and his guards spurred their horses to a gallop, racing along the Karani line toward where the fighting had exploded. The cloak and the silvery plume on his helmet flowed out behind him as he rode, and cheers followed him along the line.

He reined in just out of bowshot of the Scadori and a little in front of the Karani line. The Scadori were swarming forward, slashing with swords and hurling spears. On their left they were meeting Imperial infantry, and they weren't getting anywhere. But closer to Blade they were striking the volunteers from Karanopolis and the frontier farms, tough, battle-hardened warriors against recruits. The Karani lines were already swaying back and forth ominously.

Other men were hurrying toward the threatened section of the Karani line. But that could end up by thinning out other parts of the line too much. Damn! There had to be something to do beside just standing here and slugging it out toe-to-toe all the rest of the day. With an army of Imperial infantry Blade could and would have tried it. But against the army he had now the Scadori probably were better, man for man. The slugging match could lead to a Scadori victory. At best it would end with both armies lying on the frozen ground, dead practically to the last man. That would bring both peoples down in final ruin.

Horns bellowed among the Scadori, interrupting Blade's calculations. A mass of their cavalry, swung out from the flank of the attacking column, moving toward Blade and his bodyguard. Zogades, commanding the bodyguard, looked a question at Blade. He nodded and drew his sword. The trumpeter blew the charge, and Blade and Zogades led their men forward to meet the Scadori cavalry.

The two charges crashed into each other. The Guardians were moving faster and in a better formation, so it was the Scadori who gave way. Thirty of them fell right off their horses at the shock. And many more died, spitted on lances or cut down by swords.

Blade found himself surrounded by the screams of dying men and dying horses and by at least a dozen Scadori. He thrust at one with his lance and saw the man fall out of his saddle trying to duck under the thrust. He swung the lance sideways to panic another enemy's horse; it reared and spilled its rider under the hooves of one of his comrades. Blade's horse shied aside from a mangled, whimpering thing on the ground that had just enough strength to crawl.

Blade realized that he had lost too much speed now to charge properly, lifted his lance in one hand, and threw it like a spear. It missed its target but drove through the neck of the man's horse, which put him out of action just as effectively.

Now Blade drew both swords and swung until they made a blur about him. He chopped off lance heads, spear points, arms that reached up or out for him. He split heads, drove down shields, and batted

aside swords. A Scadori ran at him with an axe, swinging at his horse's legs. The horse saw this enemy in time, reared, and smashed him to the ground with both front hooves. Blade kept his saddle, let his swords dangle from his wrists by their thongs, snatched an opponent out of his saddle, and strangled him as he dangled in midair. He roared and cursed and bellowed threats at the Scadori and orders and warnings at his own men. Slowly he cleared a space around him, as Scadori died or grew afraid to approach him.

Half a dozen Guardians now rode up on each side of Blade. He saw that the bodyguard had driven the Scadori cavalry in all directions. Twenty Guardians were down, but five or six times that many Scadori. The enemy's cavalry was now too scattered to protect the flank of their attacking column.

Blade snapped out orders as his Guardians drew back. "Zogades---quick, ride back to the infantry lines and say I order an attack on this flank of the column. Gallop!" Zogades and four others spurred their horses away. Blade waited as the minutes passed and the men around him began to fidget. Then he saw the Emperor's purple banner move forward to stop just behind the Karani line. The drums of the Imperial bodyguard joined the trumpet calls, and the line surged forward, the banner moving with it.

A whole mass of the volunteers was swarming forward to the attack, three thousand or more, the Emperor riding with them. They caught up Blade and his Guardians in their charge and swept them forward, jostling them until they found it hard to stay in their saddles. The volunteers seemed too caught up in the excitement of the charge to be frightened. They shouted and screamed and waved their spears and swords so furiously they were almost as dangerous to each other as to the Scadori.

They struck the Scadori column in the flank so hard that scores of men were trampled underfoot and hundreds driven back by the first shock. Then the two sides went at it, hacking, thrusting, tearing at each other like two packs of rabid wolves. There was no room for a cavalry charge in this mad tangle of fighting infantrymen. Literally no room-a mouse could not have got in close to the Scadori now, let alone a horse.

Jores rode up and hailed Blade. "Is it not magnificent, how grandly they fight for vengeance and a return to their land? How can we lose?"

At least he wasn't saying they were fighting for him. That showed wisdom. But it would show more wisdom not to start counting on victory so soon. The enthusiasm shown now might not survive long hours of hard fighting and heavy casualties. Blade said as much. He added, "I would urge Your Majesty to stay behind the lines for the moment." He pointed toward the Scadori main line. "Suppose they launch another attack while you are exposed out here?"

Jores didn't withdraw, but the Scadori main line didn't attack either. Instead what was left of the attacking column drew back into its own lines. The Karani also reformed. Nothing was left from the first collision of the battle except two or three acres of ground, covered with drying blood and piled high with hacked corpses already stiffening in the cold.

Another Scadori attack now came in at the other end of the Karani line. Pardes was in charge down there, and he could easily fight his battle without Blade looking over his shoulder. Blade had plenty of time to count the bodies. He didn't like at all what he learned from that count. Except in the cavalry fight, the Scadori had managed to kill about two of their enemies for every warrior they lost.

That was a death sentence for the Karani army and the Empire if it went on too long. Blade rode back into the shelter of the Karani line and waited until the attack on the other flank died down. This time the Imperial infantry went in and gave better than they got, but the volunteers suffered just as badly. Just to

add to the scene, it started to snow. Stinging little flakes rode in on the wind, rapidly growing larger and thicker.

The third Scadori attack was the largest yet, and the warriors came on more fiercely than before. Once again it was repulsed. But this time a good many of the volunteers drifted away toward the rear. Blade and his bodyguard alone rounded up at least fifty and herded them back into line. A few ran, and Blade had a hard time keeping some of his Guardians from nocking arrows and shooting down the fugitives.

By now the Karani line was getting ominously thin. To make matters worse, the Scadori were stretching farther and farther toward the right, forcing Blade and Pardes to spread their shrinking army over an increasing front.

The snow was coming down thick and hard by the time the fourth enemy attack came in. This time a large part of the Karani army showed signs of simply turning and running. Pardes and Blade and their bodyguards rode furiously up and down, herding the panic-stricken volunteers back into some sort of battle line. After that Pardes decided to post a thin line of Imperial infantry behind the whole Karani right flank. But that was only postponing disaster, rather than preventing it. The snow was still getting thicker, and Blade began to wonder if they were going to end this battle in a blizzard. In another half hour visibility would be less than a mile.

Low visibility meant a chance for surprise by a fast-moving force. A fast-moving force-like the Karani cavalry. The thought leaped into Blade's mind, and after it a series of ideas lined up as neatly as a freight train. He rode over to Pardes and the Emperor.

"Pardes, can you spread the Imperial infantry out behind the rest of our line? They wouldn't have to hold that position for long."

The eunuch frowned. "I could. But they'd better not have to stay there. The next attack could rip us to pieces that way."

Blade nodded. "I want them there more to hold our own people in position than to fight. I'm going to take all the cavalry around our right and hit the Scadori on the flank. If the snow gets much thicker I'll be able to make the move a complete surprise, and roll them up from the flank."

"I see," said Jores. "But you'll have to take the cavalry off to the rear to do that. The recruits may think they're being abandoned, and-"

"That's exactly why I want the Imperial infantry behind the main line. If they can prop it up for just about another hour..."

"You'd better move fast, then," said Pardes. "Before too much longer the snow will be too thick on the ground for the cavalry to charge."

Blade nodded and spurred his horse off toward the rest of the cavalry without another word. Pardes was right. There was no time to do anything except put his plan into action. It should work, for the Scadori could not stand against an all-out charge delivered by surprise. Of course, if it didn't work, it would hardly be honorable for him to survive. But if it didn't work, his chances of surviving were too small to worry about in any case.

He moved out with just over three thousand men, about equally divided among Guardians, volunteers, and Nessiri. He would have liked a few hundred more, but sheer numbers weren't going to be the

decisive thing now. It would be a surprise charge, driven home with all possible force, or it would be a disaster.

They rode off into the swirling snow until the battle line was out of sight, then swung to the left. Trees and baggage wagons acted as landmarks and helped Blade navigate. Three miles in a straight line, and then another turn, once again to the left. Still another three miles, the hooves of the horses now thudding on snow covered ground. The cavalry was not only moving invisibly, it was moving as silently as an army of ghosts. They could hardly hope for a better chance for surprise. If they could only drive the charge home in the right place-

Now they were moving back in toward where the Scadori flank and rear should be. The snow drew a swirling gray curtain across the countryside and the wind whipped any battle sounds away before they reached Blade. He led his bodyguard out in front of the advancing column and spread it out in front of a wide scouting line. Word went back through the column: check your saddle girths and weapons, be ready to swing into line at the signal from Duke Blade's trumpeter. Blade knew none of the cavalry except the Guardians could really maneuver, but sheer enthusiasm could get them lined up fast enough. They all had reasons to fight-dead comrades, freedom, or lost homes. Blade wiped melting snow off his face and checked his own weapons.

They rode on, and still the gray curtain swirled across the countryside ahead of them. Here there were no convenient landmarks to tell them how far they had come. Blade found himself trying to count the steps of his horse. He also found himself trying not to hold his breath, like a nervous child in a dark room, or think about what would happen to Karan and its army if he wound up leading the cavalry aimlessly off into the blizzard. At this rate the snow on the ground would soon be too deep for the cavalry to charge or the infantry to retreat, then-

Then he saw them, less than half a mile ahead-a circle of wagons, tents, and draft animals. Another circle lay beyond it, then a third that was only a faint dark smudge against the snow. It was the Scadori baggage train, with the women and children. Now Blade knew where they were, and where the Scadori army should be. Unless the Karani had collapsed in the meantime, and the Scadori were chasing the fugitives away across country. That could have happened. But if he rode on any farther to find out for sure, he would certainly lose the surprise he needed.

Blade knew that here, in these few moments on this snowy field, he held the fate of both Karan and Scador in his hands. He did not let his mind dwell on that fact for more than a few seconds, though. He turned his horse until its head was aimed off toward where the Scadori army ought to be. Then he gave Zogades a thumbs-up. Zogades signaled to the trumpeters. They raised their long trumpets to their lips and started blowing the call to form line for the charge.

They blew longer and louder than Blade thought human lungs could manage. By the time the last blast died away the line was practically formed. As Blade had expected, the formation was ragged, with volunteers and Guardians and Nessiri all shoving and jostling each other. But he had never felt such a spirit in any army as he felt in the three thousand horsemen behind him.

He waited a moment longer, to give the trumpeters a chance to catch their breath. He drew his sword and raised it high over his head. Then he slashed it down through the snow flakes. The trumpets sounded again, blowing the charge, and the three thousand horsemen surged forward.

At first Blade had the impression of watching a silent film run in slow motion. The horses had trouble working up to a gallop, and until they did the snow muffled the thunder of hooves to a faint murmur.

Then the battle lines of the two armies loomed out of the grayness, half a mile ahead. The trumpeters blew again, without orders, for sheer delight in making noise. The noise seemed to lift the whole charge forward like a physical force. The horses moved up smoothly from a trot to a canter to a gallop, swords came out, lance points dipped, and now the thunder of three thousand sets of hooves pounded at Blade's ears. He waved his own sword and roared out:

"For the Emperor! For Karan! For your homes and your lands and your dead! Onward, and strike them! Onward!" The cheers that rose behind Blade drowned out the sound of the hooves and the swelling roar of the battle ahead. He went on shouting, though he could no longer hear himself. He went on shouting, because it somehow seemed that if he stopped shouting the whole charge would fall apart and he himself would fall down into the snow. That was a mad thing to believe, but Blade knew that in this moment he was just a bit mad.

He went on shouting and the men behind him went on cheering as they swept past the Scadori baggage train. A few spears and arrows shot out from the wagons and tents as they passed--Scadori women and old men doing what little they could. Blade was still shouting and the men behind him were still cheering when the charge struck the Scadori at a full gallop.

Blade had organized and delivered the kind of charge that can win a battle in a matter of minutes. This one did just that. The entire battle turned against the Scadori in the three minutes after Blade's charge struck home, as their battle line folded up on itself like an accordion. The charge trampled or slashed or speared down four thousand warriors in those few minutes, without losing more than a handful of cavalymen. Of the other hand, Scadori half lost their formation and piled up in a tangled mob. Most of the rest lost not only their formation but their nerve. They started to drift, then to run, toward the rear.

Then Pardes and the Emperor together led the Karani battle line forward at a run, Imperial regiments and recruits all mixed together. Nobody was bothering about formation, nobody was afraid any more, nobody was thinking of anything except closing with the Scadori and killing and killing until there weren't any more to kill.

In half an hour the battle was over. Blade could never remember a single detail of what he did from the moment the charge struck home. The first thing that stuck in his mind was sitting on his horse as Pardes and the Emperor rode up to him, grinning triumphantly. He had lost his lance, and his sword was back in its scabbard. He drew it, and realized that he hadn't struck a blow with it in the whole battle. Well, there were enough Scadori dead without his help.

There would be a good many more before long, he was afraid. Through the snow he could hear the screams of women as the Karani swarmed through the baggage wagons. The details were mercifully blotted out by distance and the swirling snow. Blade thought of saying something to Pardes and the Emperor about this, then realized it was pointless. This wasn't just the end of a battle. It was the end of a war more than two centuries long. Hadn't he himself said that defeat today would be the end of the Scadori as a people?

But he still felt very little joy in the victory as he listened to the screams. He was about to turn his horse away, when Zogades rode up. The captain's own horse was lathered white and his armor was hacked and scarred. In one bloody hand he held a sword by the tip.

"My lord Blade, I had to beat some greedy-guts infantry off to get this for you. But you're the one who deserves it, by the gods. It's the Scadori general's sword. A prisoner told me what it was, before I killed him."

"Before you-" Blade began, then a thought suddenly struck him. "Did he say who the general was?"

"Named Degar, I think he was. Least that's what it sounded like. You know these Scadori names sound funny,"

Blade nodded. So Degar was gone too, and perhaps mercifully. He would hardly have wanted to survive seeing his people destroyed and learning what had happened to his daughter. But-Blade put further thoughts along those lines firmly out of his mind. He could wish that the Karani had a great many good qualities they didn't. Perhaps Jores could do something about that, if he became the Emperor he might be and could control Pardes and others like him. But even as they were, the Karani held more hope for this Dimension than the Scadori. In helping them to their victory, he had made the best of a bad lot, but what else could he have done? He reached out his hand to take the sword.

Then it seemed as though someone was pounding the earth under him like a gigantic drum. Blade felt the trembling and vibration reach him through the body of his horse and work up through his own body. As it reached his head, pain exploded in his skull.

It was a pain so agonizing that Blade gasped out loud. His fingers clutched at Degar's sword, but couldn't close tightly enough. The sword slipped from his grasp and fell point down to the ground. The snow was deep enough now to catch it and hold it upright.

But the pain was also a familiar pain. From far away in Home Dimension Lord Leighton's computer was gripping at his brain, ready to twist his awareness and bring him back to England.

The computer's grip tightened, the twisting began, the pain soared higher. Blade saw the world of Karani and Scadori and the snowy battlefield fading away around him.

The last thing he saw before blackness came down was Degar's sword standing upright in the snow. To Blade's fading vision it looked like a cross on a grave-the grave of the Scadori people.

Chapter 25

J cleared his throat and began to read aloud.

To: Dr. L. Ferguson, Principal Psychiatric Officer, Project Dimension X

From: J

Concerning: Psychiatric assessment of R. Blade (Subject 1) in Report 97, 25 August.

Dear Dr. Ferguson: I am obliged to express a strongly dissenting opinion concerning certain of your assessments of subject's condition after completion of his recent mission.

You feel that subject's indications of ambiguous feelings at various points in his mission suggests an impairment of his decision-making powers. It is obvious to me that at most of those points the situation was indeed ambiguous. Subject's ability to recognize situations that are ambiguous and require caution in making decisions has been a major part of his extraordinary talent for special missions during the entire period I have been associated with him. It is not, repeat not, indicative of any conceivable psychiatric disorder.

You feel that subject's expressed distaste for involvement in the affairs of the various peoples encountered upon this mission may in the future lead to some dysfunctional withdrawal at a crucial moment, possibly leading to the death of the subject or the failure of a mission. Subject has encountered

a great many highly distasteful phenomena during my period of association with him and reacted to them without failing to complete a mission. Failure to so react to some of these phenomena would in my opinion indicate a degree of gross insensitivity far more dangerous and "dysfunctional" than any possible distaste for political plots or the murder of a woman he came to care for.

There is in my opinion no conceivable danger of subject becoming ineffective for further missions due to either of the above conditions. I therefore consider your report's recommendations can and shall be rejected.

Richard Blade whistled in admiration at J's command of bureaucratic language. "That's paying him back in his own coin with a vengeance, sir."

J smiled grimly. "I confess I was tempted to reply a bit more succinctly. Something on the order of 'Doctor Ferguson, you are a blazing ass who doesn't know what he's talking about. Richard Blade isn't crazy, but I have my doubts about you. Sincerely, J.' "

Blade laughed. "I can see the point. But Ferguson's actually no more out of touch with what it's like out in the field than any other ivory-tower type we'd be likely to get. Now if we could just find a good doctor who was in the Royal Marine Commandos, for example..."

J sighed. "If one existed, we'd almost certainly have turned him up by now. Well, I just wanted to read through the letter for you, so when Doctor Ferguson howls like a banshee you'll know why. Going abroad, this time, aren't you?"

"Yes. Just over to Paris for a week or two, though. I haven't dropped over that way for a couple of years, and there are some friends I want to look up."

Knowing Blade, the friends were probably female. But that was Richard's affair. J rose as Blade did, the two men shook hands, and the office door closed behind the younger man.

J sat back down and stared at the letter on his desk. He was more worried about Richard than he would ever let on to anybody except Lord Leighton, more worried by far than he had let show in the letter. It was obvious to him that Tera's death had hit Blade hard. It wasn't so much the loss itself-Richard had certainly known that Tera would be staying behind when he himself returned to Home Dimension. It was how it had driven home a reminder of his terrible loneliness, a loneliness that surrounded him both in Home Dimension and in Dimension X. Blade had lived with that loneliness now for more years than any man should be asked to stand. Could he really stand it for as many more years? J wondered.

The damnable thing was how little anybody could do about it, at least until Blade retired. But that was a long way off, as things looked now. For the moment, what was there to do?

Nothing, really. If by some miracle Blade could find a woman who accepted his secret comings and goings, and was grateful for as much of him as she could get-but where was such a woman? She would be a paragon of virtue, and Richard was too much of a gentleman to subject anyone he would be bound to respect highly to a continuous ordeal of this sort. Damn, damn, damn!

So they would go on as they had done, and hope for better luck. But it was getting harder and harder for J to accept that. He smiled. Perhaps that meant he was getting too unstable for the job? Perhaps. But he doubted it. He too had survived moments of gloom before, many of them over more than forty years. It was just that this job seemed to be giving him so damned many of them!

He sighed and pressed the button for his secretary.